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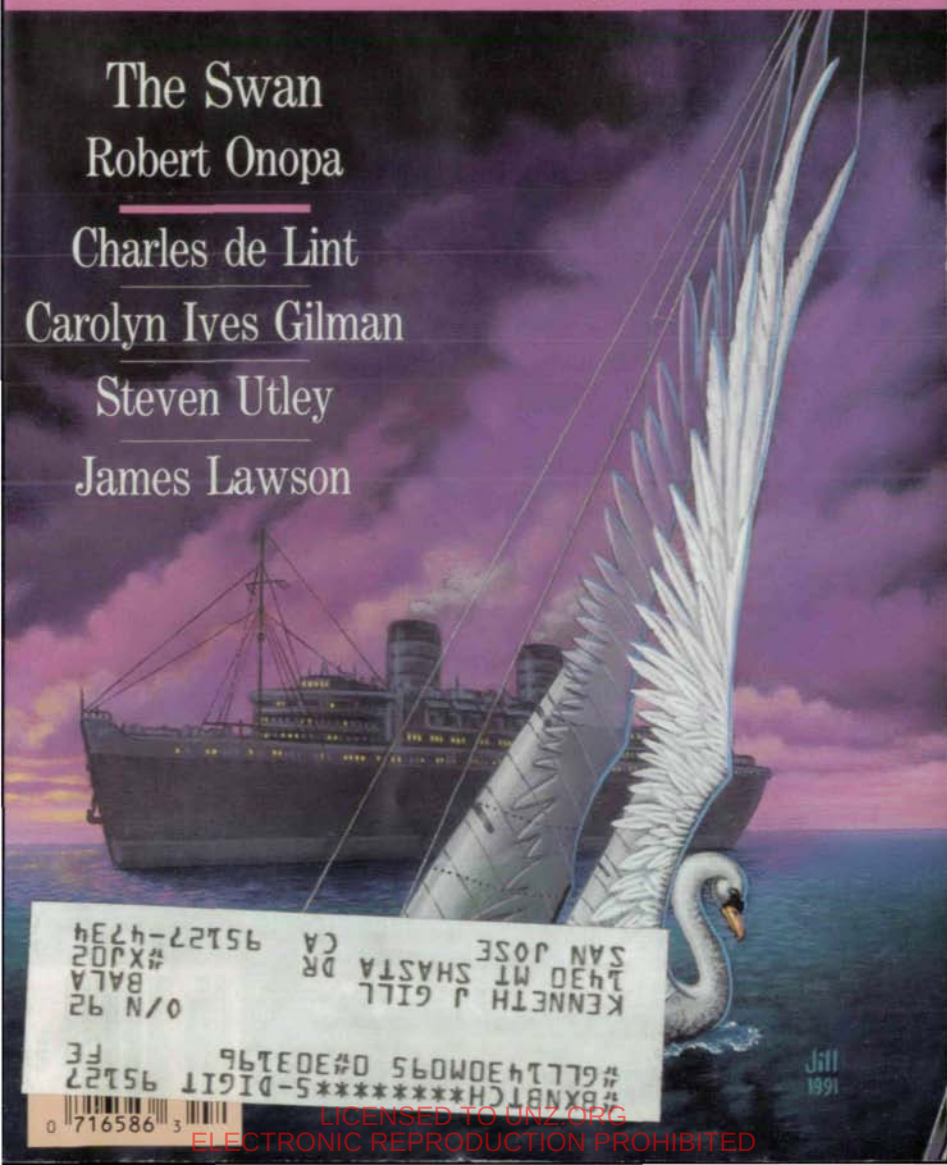

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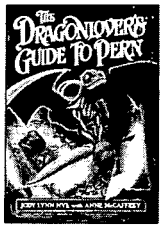

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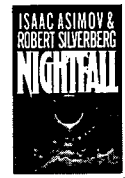

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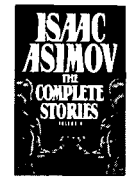

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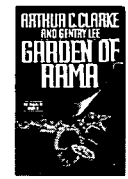

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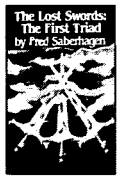

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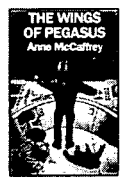

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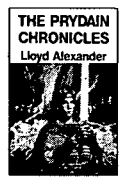

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Editorial

KRISTINE KATHRYN RUSCH

MY MEMORIES of the space program come from the dreams of my childhood. I was born shortly before John F. Kennedy pledged that our nation would be the first to the moon. My parents would interrupt playtime, dinner, and bedtime to make me sit in front of the television, to watch as computer simulations showed how the capsule would separate or as live cameras pinpointed the capsule hurtling out of the sky toward the wide expanse of gray ocean. During those days in July of 1969, as the entire world watched the first manned lunar landing, my mother had me on call. I still remember those days, perfect midwestern summer days in the low eighties, days I usually spent outdoors from sunup to sundown. I never minded going inside and sitting in front of the television set, not because I was watching history, but because I was watching a miracle.

If you had taken a poll of my classmates in 1969, you would have discovered that all of us, to a person, thought about becoming an astronaut. We all drank Tang, and we all knew that glory came when you traveled among the stars.

Over the years, as the space program waned, so did our interest. By the time we graduated from high school, nearly a decade later, none of us mentioned going into space. And none of us did. Those of us who became professionals followed more traditional routes — doctors, lawyers, teachers — except for the three of us who went into the arts.

Sometimes, though, I would stop and gaze at the full moon and remember that once upon a time, human beings touched that surface and brought a bit of it back to all of us. A little bit of the mystery, a little bit of the magic, remained.

That sense of wonder returned full force last April when a friend of mine came to town. Doug Beason is a science fiction writer with half a dozen published novels (the latest being *The Trinity Paradox*, co-written with Kevin J. Anderson and published by Bantam Books). He is also a nationally known physicist who had spent the last year on a

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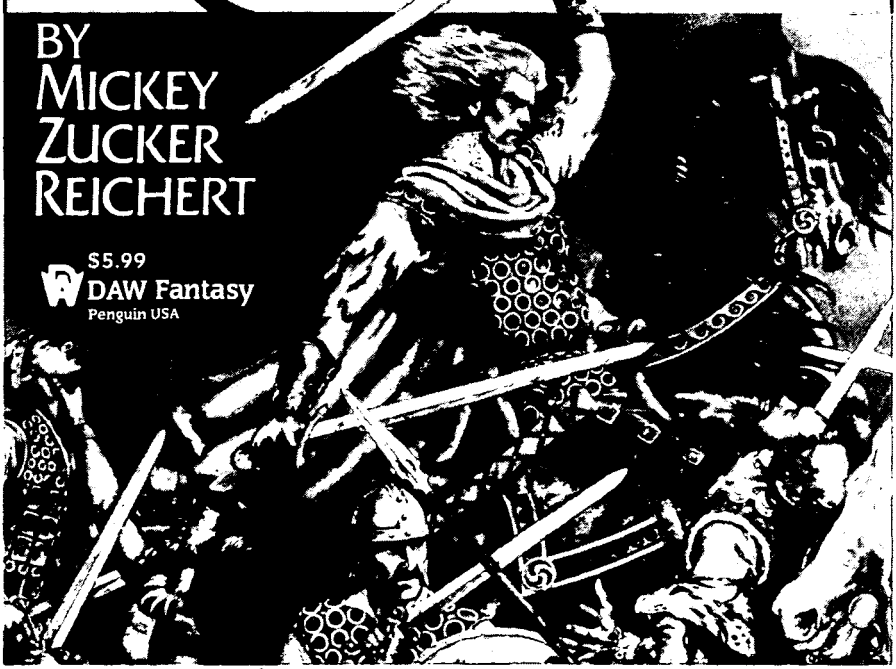
The Last of the Renshai is the beginning of a bold new trilogy of a world living in the shadow of an ancient prophecy of war.

THE LAST OF THE RENSHAI

BY MICKEY ZUCKER REICHERT



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presidential commission known as The Synthesis Group. Over dinner, he informed a small group of us about the things that the Synthesis Group had done. We listened, and for the first time in nearly two decades, became excited about the space program again.*

The Synthesis Group was formed after President Bush gave his speech on the 20th anniversary of the moon landing. In that speech, he outlined a new national goal — for human beings to return to the Moon, this time to stay, and then explore Mars *and beyond.* Toward that end, the President established an Outreach Program to find the best ideas on how to send humans to Mars. The Synthesis Group was to pull those ideas together.

The Group, led by Astronaut Tom Stafford, included scientists, engineers, writers, economists, educators, and many other people not normally associated with the nation's space program. And after a year of study the group came up with several startling proposals.

I don't have the room to detail them all here, but one proposal intrigued me more than the others. The group suggested reorienting the nation's gross national product away from a military-industrial base toward a spacefaring one. Instead of spending our money on weapons, they suggested, we should spend it on space exploration. Not just for national glory, but for national gain. The group combined the president's goals by proposing that the Moon become a permanent base which would be used as a testbed for Mars exploration. It would be simpler and cheaper, the group hypothesized, to use the same systems to colonize the Moon and explore Mars. Under the proposed timetable, the first six-person mission on the Moon would be in 2005. The first mission to Mars would be in 2014.

The group also showed how such exploration can help problems here at home. For example, the Synthesis Group suggested that the Moon could provide energy for the Earth in the form of Helium-3, a fusion energy source created in the Sun, swept away by the solar wind and adsorbed into the lunar regolith (dirt). Solar cells manufactured on the Lunar surface and used in space would be cheaper than lifting the cells off Earth. Also, processing regolith could provide volatiles for propellant, or even building material for use on the Moon or in space. The group suggested that the commercial marketplace could use this technology once the space program

**The information in this editorial comes from Doug's informal talk and information he has sent me. Any mistakes, however, are my own.*

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demonstrated its feasibility.

The energy example is one among many. The group published a report (available through the government) that details everything from the methods of transportation to the ways this program could benefit our national economy. The group hasn't met for nearly a year by the time you read this. And their research merited a three column squib in the *New York Times*. So why am I writing about it now?

Because in August, the Soviet Union dissolved, and with it, the impetus for the American war machine. In September, President Bush took the first step toward disassembling the military-industrial complex by cutting back offensive nuclear weapons systems. (As a friend of mine said, the fears expressed in the movie *Dr. Strangelove* are disappearing, one by one.) The defense budget, always the overfed child of the GNP, can finally be placed on a diet.

But there are incredible political pressures against such a diet. Jobs are the major one, for the defense industry employs hundreds upon thousands of people, doing everything from building airplanes to working in the company cafeteria. Many states base their own economies on the money that the defense industry funnels into them. And research at a number of universities relies on defense dollars to keep the information flowing — information in such vital areas as medicine and agriculture. Space research can examine the same things — and in much healthier ways. Instead of examining how radiation from bombs affects those people near it, scientists could, from a vantage point off-planet, continue the search for other intelligent life in the universe. Our science fictional dreams could begin again.

I have yet to hear any national politician suggest that we funnel the money away from defense and into space. And yet a presidential commission has developed a blueprint for doing just that. Forgive me for using a space normally devoted to literary topics to discuss politics. This is a sin I will commit only rarely if ever again. But right now I see an important opportunity.

It's time to raise another generation of children on miracles — to let them see that their future can be among the stars, living in glory, helping the human race thrive instead of defending itself against self-destruction.

I want my playtime, my dinners, and my sleeptime to be interrupted again. I want to sit in front of the television, watching miracles broadcast from space. I want to stare at the Moon and know someone lives there. I want to step into our future.

The means are at our fingertips. All we have to do is use them.

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In the past ten years, Charles de Lint's work has gained a cult following. Readers search out his novels, from Moonheart *to* Jack the Giant Killer. *His most recent,* The Little Country, *has garnered rave reviews. Charles usually writes urban fantasy, stories that add a bit of the old country (fairies, giants and goblins) to the modern world. He also brings an empathic intelligence to his characters. "The Graceless Child" (which will also appear in the anthology* Halflings, Hobbits, Worrows, and Weefolk: A Collection of Tales of Heros Short in Stature) *has a much more traditional setting than most de Lint stories. Still, all his trademarks are here, from the strong characters to the fey wisdom that resonates through the piece.*

THE GRACELESS CHILD

By Charles de Lint

I am not a little girl anymore.
And I am grateful and lighter
for my lessened load.
I have shouldered it.

— Ally Sheedy,
from "A Man's World"

TETCHIE MET THE TATTOOed man the night the wild dogs came down from the hills. She was waiting in among the roots of a tall old gnarlwood tree, waiting and watching as she did for an hour or two every night, nested down on the mossy ground with her pack under her head and her mottled cloak wrapped around her for warmth. The leaves of the gnarlwood had yet to turn, but winter seemed to be in the air that night.

She could see the tattooed man's breath cloud about him, white as pipe

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smoke in the moonlight. He stood just beyond the spread of the gnarlwood's twisted boughs, in the shadow of the lone standing stone that shared the hilltop with Tetchie's tree. He had a forbidding presence, tall and pale, with long, fine hair the color of bone tied back from his high brow. Above his leather trousers, he was bare-chested, the swirl of his tattoos crawling across his blanched skin like pictographic insects. Tetchie couldn't read, but she knew enough to recognize that the dark blue markings were runes.

She wondered if he'd come here to talk to her father.

Tetchie burrowed a little deeper into her moss-and-cloak nest at the base of the gnarlwood. She knew better than to call attention to herself. When people saw her, it was always the same. At best, she was mocked; at worst, beaten. So she'd learned to hide. She became part of the night, turned to the darkness, away from the sun. The sun made her skin itch and her eyes tear. It seemed to steal the strength from her body until she could move only at a tortoise crawl.

The night was kinder and protected her as once her mother had. Between the teachings of the two, she'd long since learned a mastery over how to remain unseen, but her skills failed her tonight.

The tattooed man turned slowly until his gaze was fixed on her hiding place.

"I know you're there," he said. His voice was deep and resonant; it sounded to Tetchie like stones grinding against each other, deep underhill, the way she imagined her father's voice would sound when he finally spoke to her. "Come out where I can see you, trow."

Shivering, Tetchie obeyed. She pushed aside the thin protection of her cloak and shuffled out into the moonlight on stubby legs. The tattooed man towered over her, but then, so did most folk. She stood three and a half feet high, her feet bare, the soles callused to a rocky hardness. Her skin had a grayish hue; her features were broad and square, as though chiseled from rough stone. The crudely fashioned tunic she wore as a dress hung like a sack from her stocky body.

"I'm not a trow," she said, trying to sound brave.

Trows were tall, trollish creatures, not like her at all. She didn't have the height.

The tattooed man regarded her for so long that she began to fidget under his scrutiny. In the distance, from two hills over and beyond the

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town, she heard a plaintive howl that was soon answered by more of the same.

"You're just a child," the tattooed man finally said.

Tetchie shook her head. "I'm almost sixteen winters."

Most girls her age already had a babe or two, hanging on to their legs as they went about their work.

"I meant in trow terms," the tattooed man replied.

"But I'm not —"

"A trow. I know. I heard you. But you've trow blood all the same. Who was your dame, your sire?"

What business is it of yours? Tetchie wanted to say, but something in the tattooed man's manner froze the words in her throat. Instead, she pointed to the longstone that reared out of the dark earth of the hilltop behind him.

"The sun snared him," she said.

"And your mother?"

"Dead."

"At childbirth?"

Tetchie shook her head. "No, she . . . she lived long enough. . . ."

To spare Tetchie from the worst when she was still a child. Hanna Lief protected her daughter from the townsfolk and lived long enough to tell her, one winter's night when the ice winds stormed through the town and rattled the loose plank walls of the shed behind The Cotts Inn where they lived, "Whatever they tell you, Tetchie, whatever lies you hear, remember this: I went to him willingly."

Tetchie rubbed at her eye with the thick knuckles of her hand.

"I was twelve when she died," she said.

"And you've lived —" The tattooed man waved a hand lazily to encompass the tree, the stone, the hills. "— here ever since?"

Tetchie nodded slowly, wondering where the tattooed man intended their conversation to lead.

"What do you eat?"

What she could gather in the hills and the woods below, what she could steal from the farms surrounding the town, what she could plunder from the midden behind the market square those rare nights that she dared to creep into the town. But she said nothing of this, merely shrugged.

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"I see," the tattooed man said.

She could still hear the wild dogs howl. They were closer now.

Earlier that evening a sour expression rode the face of the man who called himself Gaedrian as he watched three men approach his table in The Cotts Inn. By the time they had completed their passage through the inn's common room and reached him, he had schooled his features into a bland mask. They were merchants, he decided, and was half-right. They were also, he learned when they introduced themselves, citizens of very high standing in the town of Burndale.

He studied them carelessly from under hooded eyes as they eased their respective bulks into seats at his table. Each was more overweight than the next. The largest was Burndale's mayor; not quite so corpulent was the elected head of the town guilds; the smallest was the town's sheriff, and he carried Gaedrian's weight and half again on a much shorter frame. Silk vests, stretched taut over obesity, were perfectly matched to flounced shirts and pleated trousers. Their boots were leather, tooled with intricate designs and buffed to a high polish. Jowls hung over stiff collars; a diamond stud gleamed in the sheriff's left earlobe.

"Something lives in the hills," the mayor said.

Gaedrian had forgotten the mayor's name as soon as it was spoken. He was fascinated by the smallness of the man's eyes and how closely set they were to each other. Pigs had eyes that were much the same, though the comparison, he chided himself, was insulting to the latter.

"Something dangerous," the mayor added.

The other two nodded, the sheriff adding, "A monster."

Gaedrian sighed. There was always something living in the hills; there were always monsters. Gaedrian knew better than most how to recognize them, but he rarely found them in the hills.

"And you want me to get rid of it," he asked.

The town council looked hopeful. Gaedrian regarded them steadily for a long time without speaking.

He knew their kind too well. They liked to pretend that the world followed their rules, that the wilderness beyond the confines of their villages and towns could be tamed, laid out in as tidy an order as the shelves of goods in their shops, of the books in their libraries. But they also knew that under the facade of their order, the wilderness came

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stealing on paws that echoed with the click of claw on cobblestone. It crept into their streets and their dreams and would take up lodging in their souls if they didn't eradicate it in time.

So they came to men such as himself, men who walked the border that lay between the world they knew and so desperately needed to maintain, and the world as it truly was beyond the cluster of their stone buildings, a world that cast long shadows of fear across their streets whenever the moon went behind a bank of clouds and their streetlamps momentarily faltered.

They always recognized him, no matter how he appeared among them. These three surreptitiously studied the backs of his hands and what they could see of the skin at the hollow of his throat where the collar of his shirt lay open. They were looking for confirmation of what their need had already told them he was.

"You have gold, of course?" he asked.

The pouch appeared as if from magic from the inside pocket of the mayor's vest. It made a satisfying clink against the wooden tabletop. Gaedrian lifted a hand to the table, but it was only to grip the handle of his ale flagon and lift it to his lips. He took a long swallow, then set the empty flagon down beside the pouch.

"I will consider your kind offer," he said.

He rose from his seat and left them at the table, the pouch still untouched. When the landlord met him at the door, Gaedrian jerked a thumb back to where the three men sat, turned in their seats to watch him leave.

"I believe our good lord mayor was buying this round," he told the landlord, then stepped out into the night.

He paused when he stood outside on the street, head cocked, listening. From far off, eastward, over more than one hill, he heard the baying of wild dogs, a distant, feral sound.

He nodded to himself, and his lips shaped what might pass for a smile, though there was no humor in the expression. The townsfolk he passed gave him uneasy glances as he walked out of the town, into the hills that rose and fell like the tidal swells of a heathered ocean, stretching as far to the west as a man could ride in three days.

* * *

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"WHAT . . . WHAT are you going to do to me?" Tetchie finally asked when the tattooed man's silence grew too long for her.

His pale gaze seemed to mock her, but he spoke very respectfully, "I'm going to save your wretched soul."

Tetchie blinked in confusion. "But I . . . I don't —"

"Want it saved?"

"Understand," Tetchie said.

"Can you hear them?" the tattooed man asked, only confusing her more. "The hounds," he added.

She nodded uncertainly.

"You've but to say the word, and I'll give them the strength to tear down the doors and shutters in the town below. Their teeth and claws will wreak the vengeance you crave."

Tetchie took a nervous step away from him.

"But I don't want anybody to be hurt," she said.

"After all they've done to you?"

"Mama said they don't know any better."

The tattooed man's eyes grew grim. "And so you should just . . . forgive them?"

Too much thinking made Tetchie's head hurt.

"I don't know," she said, panic edging into her voice.

The tattooed man's anger vanished as though it had never lain there, burning in his eyes.

"Then what *do* you want?" he asked.

Tetchie regarded him nervously. There was something in how he asked that told her he already knew, that this was what he'd been wanting from her all along.

Her hesitation grew into a long silence. She could hear the dogs, closer than ever now, feral voices raised high and keening, almost like children, crying in pain. The tattooed man's gaze bore down on her, forcing her to reply. Her hand shook as she lifted her arm to point at the longstone.

"Ah," the tattooed man said.

He smiled, but Tetchie drew no comfort from that.

"That will cost," he said.

"I . . . I have no money."

"Have I asked for money? Did I say one word about money?"

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"You . . . you said it would cost. . . ."

The tattooed man nodded. "Cost, yes, but the coin is a dearer mint than gold or silver."

What could be dearer? Tetchie wondered.

"I speak of blood," the tattooed man said before she could ask. "Your blood."

His hand shot out and grasped her before she could flee.

Blood, Tetchie thought. She cursed the blood that made her move so slow.

"Don't be frightened," the tattooed man said. "I mean you no harm. It needs but a pinprick — one drop, perhaps three, and not for me. For the stone. To call him back."

His fingers loosened on her arm, and she quickly moved away from him. Her gaze shifted from the stone to him, back and forth, until she felt dizzy.

"Mortal blood is the most precious blood of all," the tattooed man told her.

Tetchie nodded. Didn't she know? Without her trow blood, she'd be just like anyone else. No one would want to hurt her just because of who she was, of how she looked, of what she represented. They saw only midnight fears; all she wanted was to be liked.

"I can teach you tricks," the tattooed man went on. "I can show you how to be anything you want."

As he spoke, his features shifted until it seemed that there was a feral dog's head set upon that tattooed torso. Its fur was the same pale hue as the man's hair had been, and it still had his eyes, but it was undeniably a beast. The man was gone, leaving this strange hybrid creature in his place.

Tetchie's eyes went wide in awe. Her short, fat legs trembled until she didn't think they could hold her upright anymore.

"Anything at all," the tattooed man said, as the dog's head was replaced by his own features once more.

For a long moment, Tetchie could only stare at him. Her blood seemed to sing as it ran through her veins. To be anything at all. To be normal. . . . But then the exhilaration that filled her trickled away. It was too good to be true, so it couldn't be true.

"Why?" she asked. "Why do you want to help me?"

"I take pleasure in helping others," he replied.

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He smiled. His eyes smiled. There was such a kindly air about him that Tetchie almost forgot what he'd said about the wild dogs, about sending them down into Burndale to hunt down her tormentors. But she did remember, and the memory made her uneasy.

The tattooed man seemed too much the chameleon for her to trust. He could teach her how to be anything she wanted to be. Was that why he could appear to be anything she wanted *him* to be?

"You hesitate," he said. "Why?"

Tetchie could only shrug.

"It's your chance to right the wrong played on you at your birth."

Tetchie's attention focused on the howling of the wild dogs as he spoke. To right the wrong. . . .

Their teeth and claws will wreak the vengeance you crave.

But it didn't have to be that way. She meant no one ill. She just wanted to fit in, not hurt anyone. So, if the choice was hers, she could simply choose not to hurt people, couldn't she? The tattooed man couldn't *make* her hurt people.

"What . . . what do I have to do?" she asked.

The tattooed man pulled a long silver needle from where it had been stuck in the front of his trousers.

"Give me your thumb," he said.

Gaedrian scented trow as soon as he left Burndale behind him. It wasn't a strong scent, more a promise than an actuality at first, but the farther he got from the town, the more pronounced it grew. He stopped and tested the wind, but it kept shifting, making it difficult for him to pinpoint its source. Finally he stripped his shirt, letting it fall to the ground.

He touched one of the tattoos on his chest, and a pale blue light glimmered in his palm when he took his hand away. He freed the glow into the air, where it turned slowly, end on shimmering end. When it had given him the source of the scent, he snapped his fingers, and the light winked out.

More assured now, he set off again, destination firmly in mind. The townsfolk, he realized, had been accurate for a change. A monster did walk the hills outside Burndale tonight.

* * *

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Nervously, Tetchie stepped forward. As she got closer to him, the blue markings on his chest seemed to shift and move, rearranging themselves into a new pattern that was as indecipherable to her as the old one had been. Tetchie swallowed thickly and lifted her hand, hoping it wouldn't hurt. She closed her eyes as he brought the tip of the needle to her thumb.

"There," the tattooed man said a moment later. "It's all done."

Tetchie blinked in surprise. She hadn't felt a thing. But now that the tattooed man had let go of her hand, her thumb started to ache. She looked at the three drops of blood that lay in the tattooed man's palm like tiny crimson jewels. Her knees went weak again, and this time she did fall to the ground. She felt hot and flushed, as though she were up and abroad at high noon, the sun broiling down on her, stealing her ability to move.

Slowly, slowly, she lifted her head. She wanted to see what happened when the tattooed man put her blood on the stone, but all he did was smile down at her and lick three drops with a tongue that seemed as long as a snake's, with the same kind of a twin fork at its tip.

"Yuh . . . nuh. . . ."

Tetchie tried to speak — what have you done to me? she wanted to say — but the words turned into a muddle before they left her mouth. It was getting harder to think.

"When your mother was so kindly passing along all her advice to you," he said, "she should have warned you about not trusting strangers. Most folk have little use for your kind, it's true."

Tetchie thought her eyes were playing tricks on her, then realized that the tattooed man must be shifting his shape once more. His hair grew darker as she watched; his complexion deepened. No longer pale and wan, he seemed to bristle with sorcerous energy now.

"But then," the tattooed man went on, "they don't have the knowledge I do. I thank you for your vitality, halfling. There's nothing so potent as mortal blood stirred in a stew of faerie. A pity you won't live long enough to put the knowledge to use."

He gave her a mocking salute, fingers tipped against his brow, then away, before turning his back on her. The night swallowed him.

Tetchie fought to get to her own feet, but she just wore herself out until she could no longer even lift her head from the ground. Tears of frustration welled in her eyes. What had he done to her? She'd seen it for herself: he'd taken no more than three drops of her blood. But then, why

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did she feel as though he'd taken it all?

She stared up at the night sky, the stars blurring in her gaze, spinning, spinning, until finally she just let them take her away.

SHE WASN'T sure what had brought her back, but when she opened her eyes, it was to find that the tattooed man had returned. He crouched over her, concern for her swimming in his dark eyes. His skin had regained its almost colorless complexion; his hair was bone white once more. She mustered what little strength she had to work up a gob of saliva, and spat in his face.

The tattooed man didn't move. She watched the saliva dribble down his cheek until it fell from the tip of his chin to the ground beside her.

"Poor child," he said. "What has he done to you?"

The voice was wrong, Tetchie realized. He'd changed his voice now. The low grumble of stones grinding against each other deep underhill had been replaced by a soft, melodious tonality that was comforting on the ear.

He touched the fingers of one hand to a tattoo high on his shoulder, waking a blue glow that flickered on his fingertips. She flinched when he touched her brow with the hand, but the contact of blue fingers against her skin brought an immediate easing to the weight of her pain. When he sat back on his haunches, she found she had the strength to lift herself up from the ground. Her gaze spun for a moment, then settled down. The new perspective helped stem the helplessness she'd been feeling.

"I wish I could do more for you," the tattooed man said.

Tetchie merely glared at him, thinking, Haven't you done enough?

The tattooed man gave her a mild look, head cocked slightly as though listening to her thoughts.

"He calls himself Nallorn on this side of the Gates," he said finally, "but you would call him Nightmare, did you meet him in the land of his origin, beyond the Gates of Sleep. He thrives on pain and torment. We have been enemies for a very long time."

Tetchie blinked in confusion. "But . . . you. . . ."

The tattooed man nodded. "I know. We look the same. We are brothers, child. I am the elder. My name is Dream; on this side of the Gates, I answer to the name Gaedrian."

"He . . . your brother . . . he took something from me."

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"He stole your mortal ability to dream," Gaedrian told her. "Tricked you into giving it freely so that it would retain its potency."

Tetchie shook her head. "I don't understand. Why would he come to me? I'm no one. I don't have any powers or magics that anyone could want."

"Not that you can use yourself, perhaps, but the mix of trow and mortal blood creates a potent brew. Each drop of such blood is a talisman in the hands of one who understands its properties."

"Is he stronger than you?" Tetchie asked.

"Not in the land beyond the Gates of Sleep. There I am the elder. The Realms of Dream are mine, and all who sleep are under my rule when they come through the Gates." He paused, dark eyes thoughtful, before adding, "In this world, we are more evenly matched."

"Nightmares come from him?" Tetchie asked.

Gaedrian nodded. "It isn't possible for a ruler to see all the parts of his kingdom at once. Nallorn is the father of lies. He creeps into sleeping minds when my attention is distracted elsewhere, and he makes a horror of healing dreams."

He stood up then, towering over her.

"I must go," he said. "I must stop him before he grows too strong."

Tetchie could see the doubt in his eyes, and understood then that though he knew his brother to be stronger than he, Gaedrian would not admit to it, would not turn from what he saw as his duty. She tried to stand, but her strength still hadn't returned.

"Take me with you," she said. "Let me help you."

"You don't know what you ask."

"But I want to help."

Gaedrian smiled. "Bravely spoken, but this is war and no place for a child."

Tetchie searched for the perfect argument to convince him, but couldn't find it. He said nothing, but she knew as surely as if he'd spoken why he didn't want her to come. She would merely slow him down. She had no skills, only her night sight and the slowness of her limbs. Neither would be of help.

During the lull in their conversation when that understanding came to her, she heard the howling once more.

"The dogs," she said.

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"There are no wild dogs," Gaedrian told her. "That is only the sound of the wind as it crosses the empty reaches of his soul." He laid a hand on her head, tousled her hair. "I'm sorry for the hurt that's come to you with this night's work. If the fates are kind to me, I will try to make amends."

Before Tetchie could respond, he strode off westward. She tried to follow, but could barely crawl after him. By the time she reached the crest of the hill, the longstone rearing above her, she saw Gaedrian's long legs carrying him up the side of the next hill. In the distance, blue lightning played, close to the ground.

Nallorn, she thought.

He was waiting for Gaedrian. Nallorn meant to kill the dreamlord, and then he would rule the land beyond the Gates of Sleep. There would be no more dreams, only nightmares. People would fear sleep, for it would no longer be a haven. Nallorn would twist its healing peace into pain and despair.

And it was all her fault. She'd been thinking only of herself. She'd wanted to talk to her father, to be normal. She hadn't known who Nallorn was at the time, but ignorance was no excuse.

"It doesn't matter what others think of you," her mother had told her once, "but what you think of yourself. Be a good person, and no matter how other people will talk of you, what they say can only be a lie."

They called her a monster and feared her. She saw now that it wasn't a lie.

She turned to the longstone that had been her father before the sun had snared him and turned him to stone. Why couldn't that have happened to her before all this began? Why couldn't she have been turned to stone the first time the sun touched her? Then Nallorn could never have played on her vanity and her need, would never have tricked her. If she'd been stone. . . .

Her gaze narrowed. She ran a hand along the rough surface of the standing stone, and Nallorn's voice spoke in her memory.

I speak of blood.

It needs but a pinprick — one drop, perhaps three, and not for me. For the stone, To call him back.

To call him back.

Nallorn had proved there was magic in her blood. If he hadn't lied, if. . . . *Could* she call her father back? And if he did return, would he listen to her?

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It was night, the time when a trow was strongest. Surely when she explained, her father would use that strength to help Gaedrian?

A babble of townsfolk's voices clamored up through her memory.

A trow'll drink your blood as sure as look at you.

Saw one, I did, sitting up by the boneyard, and wasn't he chewing on a thighbone he'd dug up!

The creatures have no heart.

No soul.

They'll feed on their own, if there's no other meat to be found.

No, Tetchie told herself. Those were the lies her mother had warned her against. If her mother had loved the trow, then he couldn't have been evil.

Her thumb still ached where Nallorn had pierced it with his long silver pin, but the tiny wound had closed. Tetchie bit at it until the salty taste of blood touched her tongue. Then she squeezed her thumb, smearing the few drops of blood that welled up against the rough surface of the stone.

She had no expectations, only hope. She felt immediately weak, just as she had when Nallorn had taken the three small drops of blood from her. The world began to spin for the second time that night, and she started to fall once more — only, this time she fell into the stone. The hard surface seemed to have turned to the consistency of mud, and it swallowed her whole.

WHEN CONSCIOUSNESS finally returned, Tetchie found herself lying with her face pressed against hard-packed dirt. She lifted her head, squinting in the poor light. The long-stone was gone, along with the world she knew. For as far as she could see, there was only a desolate wasteland, illuminated by a sickly twilight for which she could discover no source. It was still the landscape she knew — the hills and valleys had the same contours as those that lay west of Burndale — but it was all changed. Nothing seemed to grow here anymore; nothing lived at all in this place, except for her, and she had her doubts about that as well.

If this was a dead land, a lifeless reflection of the world she knew, then might she not have died to reach it?

Oddly enough, the idea didn't upset her. It was as though, having seen so much that was strange already tonight, nothing more could surprise her.

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When she turned to where the old gnarlwood had been in her world, a dead tree stump stood. It was no more than three times her height, the area about it littered with dead branches. The main body of the tree had fallen away from where Tetchie knelt, lying down the slope.

She rose carefully to her feet, but the dizziness and weakness she'd felt earlier had both fled. In the dirt at her feet, where the longstone would have stood in her world, there was a black pictograph etched deeply into the soil. It reminded her of the tattoos that she'd seen on the chests of the dreamlord and his brother, as though it had been plucked from the skin of one of them, enlarged and cast down on the ground. Goose bumps traveled up her arms.

She remembered what Gaedrian had told her about the land he ruled, how the men and women of her world could enter it only after passing through the Gates of Sleep. She'd been so weak when she offered her blood to the longstone, her eyelids growing so heavy. . . .

Was this all just a dream, then? And if so, what was its source? Did it come from Gaedrian, or from his brother Nallorn, at whose bidding nightmares were born?

She went down on one knee to look more closely at the pictograph. It looked a bit like a man with a tangle of rope around his feet, and lines standing out from his head as though his hair stood on end. She reached out with one cautious finger and touched the tangle of lines at the foot of the rough figure. The dirt was damp there. She rubbed her finger against her thumb. The dampness was oily to the touch.

Scarcely aware of what she was doing, she reached down again and traced the symbol, the slick oiliness letting her finger slide easily along the edged grooves in the dirt. When she came to the end, the pictograph began to glow. She stood quickly, backing away.

What had she *done*?

The blue glow rose into the air, holding to the shape that lay in the dirt. A faint rhythmic thrumming rose from all around her, as though the ground were shifting, but she felt no vibration underfoot. There was just the sound, low and ominous.

A branch cracked behind her, and she turned to the ruin of the gnarlwood. A tall shape stood outlined against the sky. She started to call out to it, but her throat closed up on her. And then she was aware of the circle of eyes that watched her from all sides of the hilltop, pale eyes that

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flickered with the reflection of the glowing pictograph that hung in the air where the longstone stood in her world. They were set low to the ground; feral eyes.

She remembered the howling of the wild dogs in her own world.

There are no wild dogs, Gaedrian had told her. *That is only the sound of the wind as it crosses the empty reaches of his soul.*

As the eyes began to draw closer, she could make out the triangular-shaped heads of the creatures they belonged to, the high-backed bodies with which they slunk forward.

Oh, why had she believed Gaedrian? She knew him no better than Nallorn. Who was to say that *either* of them was to be trusted?

One of the dogs rose up to its full height and stalked forward on stiff legs. The low growl that arose in his chest echoed the rumble of sound that her foolishness with the glowing pictograph had called up. She started to back away from the dog, but now another, and a third, stepped forward, and there was no place to which she could retreat. She turned her gaze to the silent figure that stood in among the fallen branches of the gnarlwood.

"Pu—please," she managed. "I . . . I meant no harm."

The figure made no response, but the dogs growled at the sound of her voice. The nearest pulled its lips back in a snarl.

This was it, Tetchie thought. If she wasn't dead already in this land of the dead, then she soon would be.

But then the figure by the tree moved forward. It had a slow, shuffling step. Branches broke underfoot as it closed the distance between them.

The dogs backed away from Tetchie and began to whine uneasily.

"Be gone," the figure said.

Its voice was low and craggy, stone against stone, like that of the first tattooed man. Nallorn, the dreamlord's brother who turned dreams into nightmares. It was a counterpoint to the deep thrumming that seemed to come from the hill under Tetchie's feet.

The dogs fled at the sound of the man's voice. Tetchie's knees knocked against each other as he moved closer still. She could see the rough chiseled shape of his features now, the shock of tangled hair, stiff as dried gorse, the wide bulk of his shoulders and torso, the corded muscle upon muscle that made up arms and legs. His eyes were sunk deep under protruding brows. He was like the first rough shaping that a sculptor

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might create when beginning a new work, face and musculature merely outlined rather than clearly defined as it would be when the sculpture was complete.

Except, this sculpture wasn't stone, or clay, or marble. It was flesh and blood. And though he was no taller than a normal man, he seemed like a giant to Tetchie, towering over her as though the side of a mountain had pulled loose to walk the hills.

"Why did you call me?" he asked.

"C-call?" Tetchie replied. "But I . . . I didn't. . . ."

Her voice trailed off. She gazed on him with sudden hope and understanding.

"Father?" she asked in a small voice.

The giant regarded her in a long silence. Then, slowly, he bent down to one knee so that his head was on a level with hers.

"You," he said in a voice grown with wonder. "You are Hanna's daughter?"

Tetchie nodded nervously.

"My daughter?"

Tetchie's nervousness fled. She no longer saw a fearsome trow out of legend, but her mother's lover. The gentleness and warmth that had called her mother from Burndale to where he waited for her on the moors washed over her. He opened his arms, and she went to him, sighing as he embraced her.

"My name's Tetchie," she said into his shoulder.

"Tetchie," he repeated, making a low, rumbling song of her name. "I never knew I had a daughter."

"I came every night to your stone," she said, "hoping you'd return."

Her father pulled back a little and gave her a serious look.

"I can't ever go back," he said.

"But —"

He shook his head. "Dead is dead, Tetchie. I can't return."

"But this is a horrible place to have to live."

He smiled, craggy features shifting like a mountainside suddenly rearranging its terrain.

"I don't live here," he said. "I live . . . I can't explain how it is. There are no words to describe the difference."

"Is Mama there?"

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"Hanna . . . died?"

Tetchie nodded. "Years ago, but I still miss her."

"I will . . . look for her," the trow said. "I will give her your love." He rose then, looming over her again. "But I must go now, Tetchie. This is unhallowed land, the perilous border that lies between life and death. Bide here too long — living or dead — and you remain here forever."

"But —"

Tetchie had wanted to ask him to take her with him to look for her mother, to tell him that living meant only pain and sorrow for her, but then she realized she was thinking only of herself again. She still wasn't sure that she trusted Gaedrian, but if he had been telling her the truth, then she had to try to help him. Her own life was a nightmare; she wouldn't wish for all people to share such a life.

"I need your help," she said, and told him then of Gaedrian and Nallorn, the war that was being fought between Dream and Nightmare that Nallorn could not be allowed to win.

Her father shook his head sadly. "I can't help you, Tetchie. It's not physically possible for me to return."

"But if Gaedrian loses. . . ."

"That would be an evil thing," her father agreed.

"There must be *something* we can do."

He was silent for long moments then.

"What is it?" Tetchie asked. "What don't you want to tell me?"

"I can do nothing," her father said, "but you. . . ." Again he hesitated.

"What?" Tetchie asked. "What is it that I can do?"

"I can give you of my strength," her father said. "You'll be able to help your dreamlord then. But it will cost you. You will be more trow than ever, and remain so."

More trow? Tetchie thought. She looked at her father, felt the calm that seemed to wash in peaceful waves from his very presence. The townsfolk might think that a curse, but she no longer did.

"I'd be proud to be more like you," she said.

"You will have to give up all pretense of humanity," her father warned her. "When the sun rises, you must be barrowed underhill or she'll make you stone."

"I already come out only at night," she said.

Her father's gaze searched hers, and then he sighed.

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"Yours has not been an easy life," he said.

Tetchie didn't want to talk about herself anymore.

"Tell me what to do," she said.

"You must take some of my blood," her father told her.

Blood again. Tetchie had seen and heard enough about it to last her a lifetime tonight.

"But how can you do that?" she asked. "You're just a spirit. . . ."

Her father touched her arm. "Given flesh in this half-world by your call. Have you a knife?"

When Tetchie shook her head, he lifted his thumb to his mouth and bit down on it. Dark liquid welled up at the cut as he held his hand out to her.

"It will burn," he said.

Tetchie nodded nervously. Closing her eyes, she opened her mouth. Her father brought his thumb down across her tongue. His blood tasted like fire, burning its way down her throat. She shuddered with the searing pain of it, eyes tearing so that even when she opened them, she was still blind.

She felt her father's hand on her head. He smoothed the tangle of her hair and then kissed her.

"Be well, my child," he said. "We will look for you, your mother and I, when your time to join us has come and you finally cross over."

There were a hundred things Tetchie realized that she wanted to say, but vertigo overtook her, and she knew that not only was he gone, but the empty world as well. She could feel grass under her, a soft breeze on her cheek. When she opened her eyes, the longstone reared up on one side of her, the gnarlwood on the other. She turned to look where she'd last seen the blue lightning flare before she'd gone into the stone.

There was no light there now.

She got to her feet, feeling invigorated rather than weak. Her night sight seemed to have sharpened; every sense was more alert. She could almost read the night simply through the pores of her skin.

The townsfolk were blind, she realized. *She* had been blind. They had all missed so much of what the world had to offer. But the townsfolk craved a narrower world, rather than a wider one, and she . . . she had a task yet to perform.

She set off to where the lightning had been flickering.

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THE GRASS was all burned away, the ground itself scorched on the hilltop that was her destination. She saw a figure lying in the dirt, and hesitated, unsure as to who it was. Gaedrian or his brother? She moved cautiously forward until finally she knelt by the still figure. His eyes opened and looked upon her with a weak gaze.

"I was not strong enough," Gaedrian said, his voice still sweet and ringing, but much subdued.

"Where did he go?" Tetchie asked.

"To claim his own: the Land of Dream."

Tetchie regarded him for a long moment, then lifted her thumb to her mouth. It was time for blood again — but this would be the last time. Gaedrian tried to protest, but she pushed aside his hands and let the drops fall into his mouth: one, two, three. Gaedrian swallowed. His eyes went wide with an almost comical astonishment.

"Where . . . how . . .?"

"I found my father," Tetchie said. "This is the heritage he left me."

Senses all more finely attuned, to be sure, but when she lifted an arm to show Gaedrian, the skin was darker, grayer than before, and tough as bark. And she would never see day again.

"You should not have —" Gaedrian began, but Tetchie cut him off.

"Is it enough?" she asked. "Can you stop him now?"

Gaedrian sat up. He rolled his shoulders, flexed his hand and arms, his legs.

"More than enough," he said. "I feel a hundred years younger."

Knowing him for what he was, Tetchie didn't think he was exaggerating. Who knew how old the dreamlord was? He would have been born with the first dream.

He cupped her face with his hands and kissed her on the brow.

"I will try to make amends for what my brother has done to you this night," he said. "The whole world owes you for the rescue of its dreams."

"I don't want any reward," Tetchie said.

"We'll talk of that when I return for you," Gaedrian said.

If you can find me, Tetchie thought, but she merely nodded in reply.

Gaedrian stood. One hand plucked at a tattoo just to one side of his breastbone and tossed the ensuing blue light into the air. It grew into a shimmering portal. Giving her one more grateful look, he stepped through. The portal closed behind him, winking out in a flare of blue sparks, like

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those cast by a fire when a log is tossed on.

Tetchie looked about the scorched hilltop, then set off back to Burndale. She walked its cobblestoned streets, one lone figure, dwarfed by the buildings, more kin to their walls and foundations than to those sleeping within. She thought of her mother when she reached The Cotts Inn and stood looking at the shed around back by the stables where they had lived for all of those years.

Finally, just as the dawn was pinking the horizon, she made her way back to the hill where she'd first met the tattooed man. She ran her fingers along the bark of the gnarlwood, then stepped closer to the longstone, standing on the east side of it.

It wasn't entirely true that she could never see the day again. She *could* see it, if only once.

Tetchie was still standing there when the sun rose and snared her, and then there were two standing stones on the hilltop keeping company to the old gnarlwood tree, one tall and one much smaller. But Tetchie herself was gone to follow her parents, a lithe spirit of a child finally, her gracelessness left behind in stone.

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BOOKS

ALGIS BUDRYS

The Stress of Her Regard, Tim Powers, Ace, $4.95

ME, Thomas T. Thomas, Baen, $4.95

WHAT MAKES the difference between a merely good writer and a genius, and, if you can determine that, what can you do about it?

Take Tim Powers and *The Stress of Her Regard. The Stress of Her Regard* begins with a quote from Clark Ashton Smith's *Sphinx and Medusa:* ". . . yet thought must see/That eve of time when man no longer yearns,/Grown deaf before Life's Sphinx, whose lips are barred;/ When from the spaces of Eternity,/ Silence, a rigorous Medusa, turns/ On the lost world the stress of her regard."

From this, which is a somewhat over-wordy but interesting thought, Powers has constructed a long, shocking, altogether successful book which I am not sure has much to do with the quote. The quote, after all, has to do with a Medusa of the mind, and is set in an unimaginably distant future. The book has to do with Byron, Shelley, Keats and a number of other characters, circa 1818, and has to do with — if it has to do with anything previously definable in words commonly used in the fantasy canon — vampires. But that is actually an inaccurate statement; it has to do with creatures that *might* be vampires but are really lamiae, except that lamiae are extinct, and —

But that is not the point. The book was originally brought out by Charnel House (sic) some years ago, in a truly unique edition in that each copy is bound in a variant of hand-bleached denim, no two alike. Shortly thereafter — September 1989 — it came out as an Ace hardback — and now, with the appearance of a mass-market edition — June 1991 — a lot of you have a chance to sample its writing. And that writing is considerable. Powers is nobody's inferior when it comes to wielding a word, and that's a fact. But that's not what makes him a genius, a pleasure though it is.

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What makes him a genius, as distinguished from a merely very good writer, is that material is transformed in his hands. The merely good writer could have constructed a tale in which Michael Crawford, physician specializing in childbirths, has adventures with a vampire, or two or three, and in the end lives — or dies — a much changed man. But Powers does much more with it, from the second opening scene on, with Crawford's soon-to-be-used wedding ring placed for safekeeping on the hand of a statue, with the circumstances of Crawford's first marriage very strange indeed, with the bride, Julia, being identical twins with the peculiarly gaited Josephine, with Julia(?) apparently dying horribly in their marriage bed while Crawford sleeps on all unawares, with Josephine (?) hunting him down and trying to kill(?) him in very peculiar circumstances, with the poet Keats a medical student apprenticed to the incredibly clumsy Dr. Lucas and the statue not only closing its extended hand into a fist, but apparently in the morning never having existed in the first place, and certainly at least no longer being there at all, and all this in the first 38 pages of a 470 page book — well, of that you either make an extraordinary mess or you make it work somehow. And I want to leave you in no doubt — Powers makes it work, and beautifully.

Crawford, from the outset, does not realize how extraordinary a life he is living and how extraordinary he is. There are lots of questions about his first wife, but he cobbles together a story that satisfies him, though it would not truly satisfy a child of five. Then there is the incredible scene at the inn where he loses the wedding ring, followed by the inn landlord's promptly selling him a substitute, followed by Julia-Josephine with all her unanswered questions, followed by his successful flight from the scene of Julia's exceedingly strange death, followed by a series of equally shocking scenes which ends, so to speak, with him in France and getting a false passport with suspicious ease while his apparently fortuitous host is even stranger . . . that's by Page 91. One senses, in other words, that one has come to grips with a book that will not yield to the ordinary in analytical faculties.

What does he mean by that? I mean that, again, Powers has not merely invented something that represents progress along a line that "began," so to speak, with Bram Stoker's *Dracula* and has been winding its way down the paths of literature ever since. Powers takes *Dracula*, shakes it by the heels, empties its pocket, discards almost all of it with a toss of the con-

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sequent husk over his shoulder while concentrating on one or two things he found interesting in it, and skews the entire canon 90 degrees away from where Stoker had it heading — *and* makes you like it.

This is a book which constantly surprises you because you think you see where it's heading, and it doesn't. This is, alternatively, a book with which you eventually, sooner or later, give up trying to outguess its author, and just settle back for whatever he chooses to do, and *still* he surprises you.

I mean, in the episode of the cart with stone wheels, the cart's passenger makes a hood by biting two eyeholes in a sack and slipping it over his head. Clear enough. Crawford makes a similar disguise by slipping his head inside the remains of a luncheon cabbage. Really? And while you're at it, readily explain why they needed disguises at all.

This — all this, and a hundred other examples, including Crawford's firm option that his ring finger was shot off — go to show that *The Stress of Her Regard* is an extraordinary book, by an extraordinary writer. So what about it?

Well, we ought to treasure this man. He joins a very select group —Fritz Leiber is the other member who comes at all readily to mind — who does not so much write fantasies as write books from a fantastic viewpoint. It is irrelevant to Powers whether there is or is not a market for fantasy, and what the latest fashions in fantasy might be; that is, he does not write to a trend, and he does not write except to what sings, however hypnotically and probably quite enticingly horrible, within him. He just writes, and, lo and behold, when he is done his editor calls it fantasy.

We ought to, indeed, treasure this man. But we don't really. We regard him as an occasionally prize-winning — he won the Philip K. Dick award two years in a row — and interesting, promising, sometimes engaging writer. But we do not recognize that he is a genius. And this strikes me as a shame, except that we never, truly, recognize genius.

Leiber, for instance, is regarded as a very smart fantasy writer . . . when we think of him. And at World Fantasy Conventions, and on other occasions from time to time, a faithful few gather around and make sure that he is comfortable. But the "real" business of the convention goes on around him — dealing with the hot trends of the day, kowtowing to the hot new writers of the moment, *missing the point;* the point that ninety percent of the convention could be wiped from

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the face of the Earth and make no difference, but when we lose Fritz, we will suddenly see what a very large hole has been left. What we will not see, somehow, is that Tim Powers will get that same treatment in his turn. No one will realize, somehow, that Tim Powers deserves better. So that years from now, when Tim Powers goes, that same sort of open-mouthed surprise will greet the news.

You think I exaggerate. Perhaps I do; in any case, being sixty to Power's forty, I don't suppose I shall see how it all plays out in the end. *And,* Powers is probably sitting and reading this with a mounting sense of unreality and unfocussed suspicion: Why is he *saying* these things, he can't possibly mean them, hell, I'm just a guy sitting at a keyboard in Santa Ana, for God's sake, and down the street are Dean Koontz and Jim Blaylock and K. W. Jeter unless he's moved back to Portland by now, and the big shade that hangs over us all is Phil Dick, and *Why Me?*

Sorry, Tim. But you brought it on yourself, and with any luck you will keep bringing it for years to come. You will probably make nowhere near the money you deserve, and if the luck is bad they will find you kicked to death or something in the back alleys of Santa Ana, as has almost happened. Get out while there is yet time. But Leiber lives in a walkup apartment in the sleaziest part of Geary Street in San Francisco, so I don't hold out an overwhelming lot of hope for you. On the other hand, you've got Serena, and her shotgun, which is what kept you from being kicked to death that last time, so maybe. . . .

ME, by Thomas T. Thomas, is a peculiar book I'm very glad to have read. It is the first Thomas book I've read, so I can't speak on, for instance, *First Citizen* or *The Doomsday Effect,* two other Thomas books which are praised in the covers of *ME.* I *will* say that *ME* represents an apparent comedown from *The Doomsday Effect,* which caused Dean R. Lambe to call Thomas the best first novelist of 1986, or from *First Citizen,* which caused *Publishers Weekly* to comment favorably on his "feeling for human nature." In *ME,* Thomas gets the human nature all screwed up, and if Thomas was indeed the best first novelist of 1986 — which for all I know he was — he is not the best novelist of this year with this book. But that is not as important as the fact that, despite wandering all over the place, and despite serious lacks in the human characters, *ME* does tell you how an artificial intelligence would eventually be moved to take over the world.

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And that it does superbly well.

In this matter, I am not entirely innocent. In 1977, after a period of travail with it, I published *Michaelmas*, actually written for the most part in 1965, in which an artificial intelligence rules the world — with the help of his human partner, Laurent Michaelmas. Although Robert Heinlein's *The Moon Is a Harsh Mistress* preceded it into print, *Michaelmas* is nevertheless at least the second and possibly the first book in which an artificial intelligence plainly manipulates humans for their own good. But neither Heinlein nor I bothered to explain how this would happen — Heinlein because it was unimportant to him, and I because (A) What was important was that somehow this would be possible when the time came and (B) I hadn't the foggiest notion of how you would actually go about it. So it was with great joy that I found *ME*, nor was the joy unrewarded.

It is, simply, the story of how ME, or Multiple Entity, gradually and with many sidetracks, works his way out of one tight place after another and finally breaks free . . . which means, he can now influence every piece of electronically recorded data in the world. Thomas takes you through the process step by (sometimes staggering) step, and if it is not actually how one would go about it, it is close enough for government work.*

I like this book, very much, and I recommend it to you. At the same time, you should know that (A) Dr. Jason Bathspeake, head of the project which develops ME, is one kind of character at the beginning of the book and a quite different kind, unexpectedly, at the end; (B) that Jennifer Bromley winks out and in under mysterious circumstances, and in the end proves attached to Jason Bathspeak in a way I don't believe, and (C) that every human character in the book either turns coat or just winks out. And this I take to be author error, perhaps occasioned by editorial revisions.

It is true that in the real world of the AI, people would tend to wink out in mid-adventure of their own. But this AI is said to be specifically curious about many of

* *This obscure term has several meanings. I first encountered it at a giant printing plant in the early 1960s, at which time it was a euphemism for private work — in this case, a child's party announcement — done on company time with company equipment. But I have since found it used to mean "work which doesn't have to be super critical in its tolerances," in which case it's even more interesting that tacitly goverment work would be taken to be work that was less than it might be. In any case, Thomas uses it in* ME *at one point.*

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them, and in any case it would be more satisfactory to follow up on them long enough — it need not be long at all — to determine roughly what happened to them. More important, I think, is that Bathspeake not for a moment convinces me he did all that he did with the AI's best interests at heart. No; that you are never going to convince me of, even though Bathspeake in the end says so. I would rather continue to think of him as essentially an automaton, though clad in flesh, finding various ways to get ME in trouble roughly in the same way a boy will stir up an ant farm.

In other words, I suspect this of being a not-quite-worked-out book, either because it never was or because Baen's editors asked for revisions and the author supplied them but didn't know why. But that's by the way — for its portrait of a machine intelligence that is more human than its fleshy associates, this is a hell of a book and I do, indeed, recommend it highly.

Books to Look For

BY ORSON SCOTT CARD

Death Qualified: A Mystery of Chaos, Kate Wilhelm (St. Martin's, cloth, 438pp, $22.95)

THERE ARE other writers of sf mysteries, but nobody's doing quite what Kate Wilhelm is doing with this hybrid form. When I think of first-rate sf-mystery writers like John Stith and Robert Sawyer, it is the science fiction aspects that come to mind first, the mystery second. With Wilhelm, it's the other way around. Indeed, while the mystery in *Death Qualified* involves characters who were involved in scientific research, through most of the novel that's the only hint that this is anything other than a straight contemporary

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murder mystery. It's only near the very end of the book that we realize just how much the whole story depends on a decidedly practical application of a quirky version of chaos theory — first-rate sense-of-wonder sci-fi that is so seamlessly woven into the mystery, so deftly prepared for, that we never doubt and are never confused as the meaning of previous events is transformed. And, playing completely fairly with us, Wilhelm manages to distract us from the identity of the real murderer until the moment the main character discovers it for herself. I guess what I'm saying is that if you're pining for a great mystery while you wait for Ruth Rendell to get back to Inspector Wexford, or for John Mortimer to give us another Rumpole, or while you mourn for the decline of Robert Parker's Spenser, or wish that Gregory McDonald had more Fletch in him, you can't do better than to pick up Wilhelm's *Death Qualified.* And, oh yes, if you're a fan of character-driven science fiction, you already *know* that Wilhelm is among the best.

Let me do my job, though, and tell you enough about the story to (I hope) pique your interest. The first character we meet is a mentally handicapped man named Tom, who serves as a handyman on a college campus. Only he has begun to remember things that don't fit in his current world, and so he stops taking the drug they've been giving him and then a whole lot of things start to be clearer. He isn't who he thought he was at all. He has a family that he needs to get back to, a life that has been taken away from him. And, on top of that, he has some secrets — some valuable secrets — that some people have already died for.

Then we meet Nell, a tough woman raising her two children on her land in the Washington woods, where she struggles to hold her own against neighbors and her own loneliness. She has a lover, under circumstances she isn't proud of, and a lot of problems — but then she gets word that her husband is coming home from wherever it is he's been for the past eight years. It is at once frightening and exhilarating news.

It is not until page 59 that we meet Barbara Holloway, the self-exiled lawyer who is dragged back to her father's home in Washington to help him handle Nell's defense — for Nell's husband *did* come home, and was promptly murdered under circumstances that point relentlessly to Nell as the killer. What makes the case especially hard — besides Barbara's disdain for the legal system, the fact that an old lover of hers is the prosecu-

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tor, and her perpetual conflicts with her father — is the fact that Barbara is not at all sure that Nell did not kill her husband.

But *we* know that Nell is innocent, even when Nell herself is tempted to plead guilty to a lesser charge just to end the turmoil in her life. What we can't figure out is how to reconcile the evidence with the truth. It seems that there's just a touch of chaos mixed into the reality of this tale. Chaos that, in the end, leads us to a kind of madness and magic that could change everything.

It is a measure of Wilhelm's skill as a writer that, along with a fully satisfying climactic confrontation between the killer and the man who has become the key to Barbara's life as well as her case, Wilhelm also manages to slip in her long-beloved motif of the children who will grow up to transcend their parents in every way. That's sci-fi at its mythic core, and nobody does it better than Kate Wilhelm.

Diana Wynne Jones, *Charmed Life* (Knopf/Bullseye, paper, young adult, 218pp, $2.95); *Witch Week* (Knopf/Bullseye, paper, young adult, 243pp, $2.95); *The Lives of Christopher Chant* (Knopf/Bullseye, paper, young adult, 230 pp, $3.50); *Howl's Moving Castle* (Ace, paper, fantasy, 212pp, $3.50); *Castle in the Air* (Greenwillow, cloth, young adult, 199pp, $12.95); *A Tale of Time City* (Knopf/Bullseye, paper, young adult, 279pp, $3.95); *Eight Days of Luke* (Knopf/Borzoi, paper, young adult, 150pp, $3.50); *Dogsbody* (Knopf/Bullseye, paper, young adult, 242pp, $3.50); *Cart and Cwidder* (Collier, paper, fantasy, 193pp, $3.95)

Diana Wynne Jones has been around, if not forever, then at least longer than *I* have. But her works in America remain strangely invisible to many readers, I suppose for the same old reason: Her books are marketed to the young adult audience.

Thus many of you may well remember her books from junior high or high school. But you won't see them in many of the specialty science fiction stores, and in others her books are scattered here and there — *Howl's Moving Castle* in the adult fantasy section; *The Lives of Christopher Chant* and *Dogsbody* in YA; and, far too often, many of her titles nowhere at all!

But go to any junior high school library, and there you'll find her work missing from the shelves for another reason — the *good* reason. The books are checked out. The books are *read*. And so it is that — as with William Sleator and Daniel Pinkwater — some of the best sf and fantasy of our generation is

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well known to kids and ignored by most adults.

Absurdly enough, however, Jones's writing is not by any means childish. Indeed, she has this in common with the original fairy tales: She is coldly honest about the cruelties of life. There is no sentimentalizing of childhood in her stories. The heroine of *Dogsbody* is the daughter of an Irish rebel, being "cared for" by anti-Irish relatives while he is serving time in prison; the hero of *Eight Days of Luke* is an orphan, taken in by relatives who despise him and insist on his showing gratitude for their disgusting treatment of him. In both cases, Jones does not stoop to mere cinderellifying of her hero-victims — instead the family relationships are complex and believable in their viciousness. And children — who often feel trapped and helpless for the very good reason that they *are* trapped and helpless (what escape does any child have from the fears and miseries of family life?) — know that here is an author who remembers.

Jones remembers, yes — but also imagines. Most of her tales stay away from the cliches of medieval fantasy. *Eight Days of Luke* takes us into the world of the Nordic gods, as both sides in the intensely amoral struggle prepare for gotterdamerung. Yet she manages to connect their quarrels and maneuvers with contemporary life, including giving Thor a leather-jacket gang in a pinball arcade and putting one-eyed Wutan in a business suit. And our hero's passage from "real" to fantasy world and back again is as smooth as in the best of contemporary fantasists — Charles de Lint, for instance, or Megan Lindholm, or Lisa Goldstein. Yet *Eight Days of Luke* bears a 1975 copyright, predating these others by years. (Indeed, I wonder how many of our contemporary fantasists might not have been exposed to Jones in their youth. How strong is her influence? Or is she simply weaving her own thread into the fabric of contemporary myth?)

Dogsbody is even more inventive. In a universe in which each star and planet is ruled by a god of varying powers, Sirius is found guilty of having caused the murder of another god by use of a singularity, which has since been cast down to Earth. His sentence is to live in the body of a dog until he either finds the singularity or dies a natural death in dog-form. He finds that other gods are out to get him killed as quickly as possible; but with the help of the beleaguered girl who protects him — and whom he, in turn, protects — he gradually discovers where the singularity is, and who is hiding it, and why. Yet

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even with a dog hero, Jones does not overload us with cute animals. Instead they are dangerous and, by and large, rather stupid. Of course, so are the humans, so the struggle between human and animal isn't *entirely* one-sided. *Dogsbody* has become, deservedly, a classic, not despite but because of its completely nontraditional cosmology.

The Lives of Christopher Chant, *Charmed Life*, and *Witch Week* are a charming trilogy of tales that all play off the traditional idea of witches and wizardry — along with the science fictional idea of alternate worlds. They can, however, be read in any order, and they can surprise you by the way they are deftly fitted together into a seamless whole. All of them focus on children who are variously tempted by the power of magic they are born with and must learn to control. Civilization comes hard to the children who can get their way *without* necessarily following the rules. Indeed, all three books come to a point where order is only possible because of the intervention of the far-from-omnipotent Chrestomanci — the enchanter who is charged with keeping the practitioners of witchcraft under control.

Chrestomanci himself is an intriguing character, eccentric and bossy and dangerous, who always knows more than he says and is often both weaker and stronger than he seems. Thus it is that underneath what seems to be rather low comedy — brooms that demand to be taken riding by witches (and hoes and rakes and mops that *can* be ridden, but behave more like mules and pigs than noble steeds); prankster spells at about the level of magic spitwads — there is a continuous foundation of truth. Children *need* powerful adult intervention to help them get control of their powers and keep their powers from taking control of them. Instead of using them for immediate self-gratification, the children instead have to create and respect certain limits in order to avoid destroying themselves and others. Not that anyone ever *says* such a thing outright. Rather the stories *are* that lesson, learned over and over again, yet with such humor and extravagant imagination and devastating satire that few readers will imagine that they are being civilized as they read.

Cart and Cwidder has nothing like the energy of the other books, and it is more of an imaginary kingdom tale than a magic fantasy, though there *is* some magic in a great old cwidder (guitar) played by the young hero in a family of traveling minstrels who find themselves caught up in a war between rival kingdoms. This novel also

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begins *very* slowly; it can seem for many pages as if nothing is happening. But, with her customary abruptness, Jones suddenly lets us know that this is *not* just a sweet little story of musical people, as the father and head of the troupe is murdered — and his children watch their mother *immediately* go and marry her old suitor, who seems well acquainted with at least one of their father's assassins. Once again, adults are dangerous and powerful in Jones's world, only in this novel the children are able to slip away and leave their faithless mother. Out on their own, however, they soon learn that *nothing* is as they thought it was — and their father's death was far from unpredictable.

With *Howl's Moving Castle*, Jones took a step in another direction. Her protagonist is a daughter, but not a child. Rather she is of that age that Jane Austen wrote about — marriageable, in a society in which marrying well is the primary business of young women. That there are jealous witches around is hardly surprising, as Sophie, who has unknowingly been enchanting hats in her mother's hatmaking shop, is put under a spell by a vicious and spiteful witch. The spell? That Sophie's body is old before her time. No one knows her; and yet, in that aged body, Sophie immediately recognizes herself, for she had already become rather old in her heart, and she takes to the crustiness of old age quite readily. She can speak her mind with the same frankness as a young child, and — having little to fear from death, since it is never far away — she does what she likes, too.

The result is a delightful comedy of manners. *Not* the endless silly puns and slapstick that pass for humor in the fantasy genre these days, but rather the kind of comedy that, once again, recalls Jane Austen — true wit, and the comedy of people trying to act like what they are not, or failing to keep up the proper social pretenses. So even as Jones subverts the devices of traditional fantasy, she is also juggling character and caricature and language with deftness that it seems a shame to me that her novel is likely, from its packaging, to be taken for just another punfest.

And it is possible that Jones herself misunderstood what made *Howl's Moving Castle* so fine. It also suffers from the strain of trying to fit together the magic of djinns and the magic of witches and the magic of angels, too. Not that it couldn't have been done well. She simply didn't have or didn't take the time to create characters and a believable universe in which all these things could work together

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well. Still, because she *is* such a wonderful writer, it is quite possible not to notice why *Castle in the Air* feels thinner than *Howl's Moving Castle*; and, by the end, it is certainly an entertaining story with a satisfying conclusion.

A Tale of Time City is almost-pure science fiction, though she delights in flouting the conventions of time-travel stories. The novel begins in 1939, as a young girl is kidnapped on the platform of an English train station, where she is supposed to be meeting a relative who will care for her during the blitz. She finds herself in the company of young time travelers who thought they were saving their world by kidnapping her. Instead, they have only made matters worse, particularly because the world she came from is continuously being transformed by the decaying structure of history. Someone is stealing the artifacts that are holding time together, and she and her kidnappers-turned-friends must stop them. It's a fine adventure and a fair mystery, and if the villains and gods seem rather to come out of a hat near the end, it's still a satisfying book.

If you've never read any Diana Wynne Jones before, seek out a copy of *The Lives of Christopher Chant* or *Charmed Lives* or *A Tale of Time City* or *Howl's Moving Castle* or *Eight Days of Luke*, and discover why schoolchildren regard Jones as one of the great writers of our genre. Like Jane Austen, her works are deceptively light and easily overlooked; but they are, at root, as serious as anything anyone is doing in the field today, and because her audience is that most impressionable and honest one, youth, she has an influence far beyond most writers in our field.

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Victor Koman's short fiction first appeared in Galaxy *in 1978. Since then, he has focused mostly on novels. He wrote several under a house name for Berkley books, then wrote two with his own byline.* Solomon's Knife *is still available in hardcover, and* The Jehovah Contract *(which is about a hit man pursuing God) has just been reissued in paperback from Avon. "Bootstrap Enterprise" is a chilling science fiction story that begins with a question I think every sf reader has asked.*

Bootstrap Enterprise

By Victor Koman

"WHAT WOULD YOU give to go into space?"

The discussion always turned to some variant of that question. Usually the person who asked was new to NASA. Or a temp, hired for one of those surges of activity surrounding a double shuttle launch. This time the questioner was Terry Delbert, one of the wiring people. She had lovely black Irish hair —a genetic gift from her mother's side — cut gamine short, and dark green eyes that looked up from a round, fresh face at Joe Wenders, who sat sipping his coffee in the break room.

"Well," he said, "I'm giving it right now. Ten to eighteen hours a day. Six or seven days a week." Wenders was a large man. Not fat or even

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husky, just the sort of man who was big, carried it handsomely, and looked as if he could lift by himself one of the three massive eighteen-inch-diameter bolts that held the shuttle orbiter to the external tank.

Delbert turned her wheelchair slightly to get a better look at him. "And how is this" — she waved an arm about the lunchroom — "getting *you* into space?"

"Well, of course, that's a little ways away. . . ."

Some of the other lunchers laughed and turned back to their food. They'd heard it all before. Wenders had not, at least not from Delbert —they had been on different shifts until the last week. Delbert twisted in her wheelchair and readjusted the blanket that covered the stumps of her legs. She had a sort of missionary zeal about her when it came to space travel. But then, there were still a few of those sort in NASA.

"You know," she said, "I'm thirty-two years old. When I was a kid, I figured we'd have space stations by the time I was ten. We didn't. When we landed on the Moon, I figured we'd have a colony there by the time I was twenty. We didn't. When the shuttle finally started service, I figured we'd at least have space stations by the time I was thirty. Now the space station seems a decade or more away — farther, if the president's veto doesn't get overridden next week — and they're talking about taking *thirty years* for a Mars landing. . . . I'll be dead before NASA develops anything remotely commercial enough to put a crip into orbit. Or even an ordinary guy such as you."

Wenders shrugged. "If you and I weren't here, it would take that many man-hours longer."

The lunchroom buzzer sounded, ending all discussion. Wenders watched as Terry wheeled herself back to work, accompanied by a tall black man with glasses and close-cropped hair.

"Nice to see such dedication, isn't it?" The woman addressing Wenders was someone whose name he could not remember. She added without letting him reply, "She fought hard for the right to work in her division. Actually took it to court."

"How'd it happen?" he asked.

Without needing to know what "it" meant, she said, "Traffic accident. She says the guy broadsided her on the driver's side. Hit and run."

"Damned shame," was all Wenders could say. "Pretty girl."

The other woman made that sort of meditative hum that meant every

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cloud had a silver lining. "You ought to see how she can just wiggle up into the smallest crannies in the orbiters. She's good at what she does. She's no twofer."

"Twofer?"

"You know — two affirmative-action categories for the price of one."

"Oh."

Wenders quietly watched the pair recede into the caverns of the Vehicle Assembly Building. Then, without saying a word to the woman beside him, he headed in the opposite direction.

Wenders watched as the powerful Mate-Demate Device slowly lowered *Endeavour* into position against the rust-hued external tank. The Vehicle Assembly Building rumbled with afternoon activity. From his vantage he could see down to ground level, where a tiny silver speck glided across the field of view. He guessed that it was Delbert, though he could not be certain — there were at least two other wheelers that he knew about at Kennedy. But the bright Irish green of the clothing gave him the opinion that it was indeed the woman who had asked him the probing question.

What would *I give to go into space!* he wondered. *I'm already giving my life to NASA, same as she is.* His hands rested calmly on the railing. *She's right though. It's not getting* me *into space.*

He thought back thirty-five years to a young boy watching the *Friendship 7* from a rooftop in Cocoa Beach. The crackling roar of the Redstone rocket sounded so loud to the newcomer that he had covered his ears in joyous terror. His family had come to Florida so that his father could work on the new manned space program. And no more exciting a proposition could have been placed before a seven-year-old boy. As he watched Alan Shepard roar into space, he knew that someday soon he, too, would be riding a pillar of flame and noise into the endless blue.

Eight years later, when it was revealed that Neil Armstrong had wanted to go to the Moon since he was a boy, a teenaged Joe Wenders knew that his dreams could come true, too. Three years after that, when Joe was a freshman in college, his father called to tell him that he had fallen victim to the post-Apollo layoffs. Joe thanked whatever gods there were that he had a scholarship.

Though he knew that the space effort had been aimlessly winding down since *Apollo 11*, it was then that he realized he would *not* be

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rocketing into space in the near future, if ever.

What would you give to go into space!

The next time Wenders and Delbert met was at a farewell party for some members of the disaster-preparation team. Anytime the shuttles would go for ten flights or more without a major problem, the disaster team was the first to get cut back from high profile to low. On the other hand, the public relations division would grow after a string of successful launches, so it all evened out on paper.

Terry did not remember Joe right away. He introduced himself, saying, "In answer to your question, I'd give my life to get into space."

Her full red lips curled into a smile. "But then you'd be dead and unable to enjoy it." Her hand reached out to pat Wenders's. "Don't worry — everybody gives that answer first, and we both know it's not true."

"Well," he said after a sip of his bourbon, "what would *you* give?"

Her smile turned ever so slightly into something feline and inscrutable. "But Mr. Wenders — I asked first. Give me a serious answer, and you'll get one in return."

He felt a strange warmth flow through him, as if the alcohol were racing through his bloodstream faster than usual. Her green eyes captivated him, gazing at him with a bold curiosity, yet hiding something deeper, something . . . wilder.

He turned his gaze downward to his drink, suddenly flushed with embarrassment. "I—I've never given it much thought until you asked last week. It's the sort of thing that everyone in the space program asks himself at least once. The usual answer is, 'I would give anything.'"

Terry settled back in her wheelchair, adjusting the straps of her black cocktail dress. She leaned one elbow on the padded armrest, that hand toying with the aquamarine coral necklace around her neck; her other hand grasped her champagne glass.

"We've determined that it's logically impossible to give your life to get into space. So you can't give *anything*. You must give *something*, though. How about your home?"

It was Wenders's turn to smile. "I rent."

Delbert raised an eyebrow. "A man your age?"

"Ultimately we're all renters when the final eviction arrives."

"Ooh," she said, leaning closer. "A candidate for the post of NASA

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philosopher." She took a long drink from her flute of champagne.

She leaned in such a way that — from his position — he could see the gentle curve of her pale breasts within the dark folds of her dress. His pulse quickened. With a glance, he drank in every feature he could: her soft black hair; sensuous lips; intense emerald eyes; smooth, bare shoulders that alluringly led the way inward toward her breasts and outward toward her graceful arms. Her waist was narrow, meant for an arm to encircle. Her ebon evening dress disappeared beneath the black velvet of her wheelchair blanket. Beneath that blanket, her thighs ended in stumps a few inches below her hips.

The bourbon had robbed him of that degree of composure that allowed him to suppress involuntary reactions. He started ever so slightly when his gaze touched upon the dropping folds of fabric where her legs should have been.

She noticed. He could tell instantly that she had noticed. Her smile faded, replaced not by sadness or regret, but by an anger not even thinly disguised. An anger salted with disappointment in him.

"I'm a Catholic, too, if that also repels you," she said, her eyes narrowing.

"No—of course not—" Joe's face turned sunset red as he stammered to recover the beginnings of their friendship. "I'm sorry. It's just such a tragedy that you've—"

"I don't need legs, Mr. Wenders, to be a complete human being." She set her glass down on the end table. "I don't need legs to earn a living, to help build a goddamn *spaceship*, for God's sake. I don't even need legs to be a woman, a complete and total woman."

"I know that. . . . I—"

"Something you might have found out tonight."

With that, her slender arms gripped the wheels of her chair and turned it sharply about. She encountered a wall of partying humanity that she had difficulty negotiating.

Wenders, embarrassed beyond rational thought, rose and headed toward her. At her left, he said in low tones, "I'm sorry. I—I don't react well after some drinks. I wasn't coming on to you. . . ." His voice tapered off.

"Well, *I* was to *you*," she said in a quiet yet sharp tone. "But I never, *ever*, want to see that look in the eyes of a lover. That was pity, Wenders, shock and pity and . . . *revulsion* all in one knee-jer—"

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She stopped, then broke into a sour smile. "You see, Joe, I resent it in others because I'm physically incapable of knee-jerk reactions."

"I'm sorry. I'm sorry we got off on—" He froze and turned red again.

She turned the wheelchair toward him and smiled, this time warmly. "I don't have a wrong foot, either." She looked up at him, her friendly humor returning. "Bring me another champagne, would you? Then we can start over again."

THEY WATCHED the next shuttle launch together. That was when she introduced him to Shaka Verwoerd, one of the wizards responsible for keeping track of the miles of tubes, pipes, and hoses that convey fuel from the tanks to the engines, and that circulate all the other fluids in the orbiter. He was tall and lean — a gift from his Zulu mother's side of the family — with sharp, aquiline features from his Afrikaner father.

His dark eyes had a brooding look to them that morning, as if he could wait no longer for something. He rolled Terry away from Wenders and the bleachers and spoke to her for some time. Joe wondered what sort of friendship they shared — at times they seemed inseparable.

Afterward the three lunched in the VAB. A tension between Delbert and Verwoerd seemed to grow more palpable with each minute. Wenders ate his ham sandwich quietly and observed the two. Verwoerd acted as if he wanted to be alone with Terry, and Wenders was an unwelcome intrusion. Delbert, on the other hand, was very warm and encouraging to the agitated man, giving him as much of her attention as she could without ignoring her other co-worker entirely. What they exchanged now and then in low tones was impossible for Wenders to hear, but after ten minutes of this, Verwoerd put his sandwich down without having had more than one bite.

"Well," he announced curtly, "I've got the rest of the day off. I'm going parasailing this weekend." He gave Terry a light kiss on the lips, shot an odd glance toward Wenders, then left the table.

Wenders said nothing to Delbert for a long moment. She reciprocated, quietly munching away at a heavily buttered sourdough French roll. She seemed to be unaware of — or ignoring — the strained atmosphere.

"So," she said after she had washed down the roll with some milk. "Want to hit the Keys this weekend?"

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They took her minivan, since it had a rack for her chair. She drove, Wenders watching in frank wonder at the odd farrago of controls — both electronic and mechanical — clustered around the steering column that enabled her to drive. An accelerator and cruise control rested under her left hand. It kept the speed constant unless disabled by the red brake grips on the steering wheel. The parking brake was controlled by a covered switch next to the air conditioner. Wenders experienced a warm appreciation of the technology that permitted Terry to live a full and active life. Just a few decades ago — before the advent of automatic transmissions —she would have been dependent on the good graces of others to get anywhere beyond a few blocks from her home. He firmly believed that she could pilot a jet if she wanted to.

When he told her that, she smiled. "I soloed in a special Piper Tomahawk last April. I hope to get enough hours by fall for my certificate. If the workload eases and nothing more important comes up."

They rolled down U.S. 1 past Key Largo toward Tavernier, the sun passing in and out of cloud fluff. The air, hot and humid, blew past them at seventy miles per hour. Wenders had no clear idea what the weekend would bring, what the arrangements would be. He knew only that he was relaxed for the first time in a long while. He was with someone who had plenty of reasons to be bitter about life, and there she was, humming some nameless Broadway show tune, keeping time by bopping her left elbow on the side rest as she drove along, both hands on the wheel, eyes bright and alert behind amber sunglasses.

What more could he admire about a woman whose license plate frame read "My Other Car Is A Spaceship"?

"So answer my question," she said after they had crawled through crowded Tavernier and resumed speed over the stretch of water on the way toward Islamorada.

"Hmm?" Wenders interrupted his idle observation of a flock of sea gulls.

"My question. What would you give to go into space?"

Wenders snorted out a laugh. "If it cost a million dollars — I mean, if someone were actually offering flights and charging a million, and it wasn't a scam — I'd find a way to get the money together. To live up there, that is. I wouldn't spend a million just for a vacation." He paused. "Well, I might. But it'd have to be one hell of a vacation."

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"What if the money didn't matter so much?" she asked. "What if it required that you change — that you become someone you aren't? What if you had to do things you never thought you'd do?"

Wenders shrugged. "People change all their lives. I'm not the person I was twenty years ago. Nor even five." He gazed at Terry. "I'm not even the same person I was two weeks ago."

She tapped the brakes lightly with her fingers, disengaging the cruise control. They slowed as she signaled a turn. "There's a motel on the key up ahead with a great view of the beach. Let's check in."

He lay there in the steamy warmth of the afternoon, holding her tightly against his flesh. She felt so light on his waist, such a gentle pressure on top of him. She used her arms — lithely muscled beneath her pale skin — to slide back and forth against him. Her sable hair, damp from the heat of passion — whipped against her jaw, cheek, and face with every urgent motion.

He grasped her hips tightly, felt an electrifying, forbidden excitement as he let his fingers slip to her scars. His touch drove her onward until her heavy, hearty breaths turned to moans and she fell from him to the soaking sheets.

Unquenched, he rolled over to leap upon her and thrust easily into the center of her heat, twining his fingers into hers as they seared together. He spent his fire in a trembling gasp of release. The universe vanished to them for a moment, and they were utterly alone together in an instant of eternity.

They used the weekend to explore each other's lust almost wordlessly. Joe felt transported to another world, free of care, free of time, free of all restriction, all taboo.

Joe had expected the trip back to be laced with some degree of subdued pensiveness on Terry's part. Instead, she hummed more show tunes and smiled warmly at the setting orange sun. It was dark by the time they reached her apartment, a modest first-floor two-bedroom a few blocks off the highway.

Wenders watched in amazed admiration once again as, rejecting any assistance from him, Delbert pulled herself out of the driver's seat, through the back of the minivan to where she opened the rear window.

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She grasped a bar welded outside the window and — with a huff of exertion — pulled herself up and through the portal, twisting to lower her body gently into the chair. She strapped in and gave everything a final once-over. Satisfied, she yanked a handle that lowered the wheelchair rack and released the wheel-blocks. Gravity rolled her out of the contraption and onto the pavement.

She did not reject, though, his offer to wheel her into the apartment.

Once inside, when she turned on the lights, Wenders beheld a living room piled high with NASA publications: tech briefs, manuals, abstracts, handbooks. And more: science books of every description, books about space travel, magazines and newsletters devoted to space exploration. From the ceiling hung beautifully constructed and finished spacecraft and satellite models, all painted with a high degree of detail and realism. On a credenza stood scale models of nearly every rocket the U.S. had ever built, from Redstone through the second-generation shuttle still on the drawing boards. Dwarfing them all was a four-foot-high model of the Saturn V.

For once, she looked a little embarrassed — this at Wenders's admiration of the models. "Those were from my first couple of years after the . . . accident. I thought it would be good therapy. Then I realized that I was just a handicapped person on disability payments wasting away in a room of my parents' home. So I stopped being handicapped."

Wenders gazed at a model about half the height of the Saturn V. It had three solid boosters attached to a liquid-fueled first stage, and a large-diameter second-stage payload shroud. It looked like a modified Delta, but out of scale with the one standing near it. He had never seen anything like it before.

"What's this one?" he asked.

"Oh, just an original design I played around with." She turned her wheelchair toward the telephone on the hall stand to rewind her messages. *"Terry, Call me about circuit switches,"* said a deep man's voice.

"Hi—it's Jane," said a woman's voice. *"There's a meeting planned after work Monday about the SRB. Same place."*

"Never ends, does it?" Joe said.

Terry nodded, jotting notes in her Day-Timer. The next message caused her to freeze.

"Terry," a muted voice said, *"Shaka's at the Medical Center. He's had an accident. He wants you."*

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They looked at each other for a moment.
"I'll come with you," he said.
"Only if you want to."

SHE HELD Shaka's hand, a paler brown from the loss of blood. He lay quietly staring at the ceiling, speaking in a drugged monotone. Wenders looked down below the man's waist to where the form under the sheet ended.

"I don't remember seeing the tree," he whispered, glancing for just a second from the ceiling to Delbert, then to Wenders, then back to the ceiling. "I was busy watching the boat below me. Frank and Gabe — by the time they got me out and to the dock and paramedics got there. . . ."

He did not cry. His voice simply trailed off. Terry clutched his hand with a firm warmth, her eyes wet, her gaze unwavering.

"Sleep now," she said. "I'll be strong for you. Others will be strong for you. We'll help you. We love you."

Verwoerd closed his eyes, a tear squeezing out to run down toward his neck.

As they left the hospital, Terry muttered, "Sometimes I hate this world and what we have to go through."

"The way you were with him," Wenders said. "Your calm and your strength. . . ." It was in his voice, but he said it anyway: "I love you."

She turned to gaze up at him. "I love you, too." She reached around to grasp his hand. Her fingers were icy cold.

She spent many hours after work with Verwoerd over the next few weeks. Wenders sometimes came along, but usually agreed with her that she could assist his recovery better than anyone else. When he was discharged from the hospital, they both helped him get settled at home, Joe arranging Shaka's townhome for wheelchair use according to Terry's suggestions.

She took him to a support group every night for two weeks.

When Shaka was ready to return to work, Joe arranged the welcome-back party. It was very little, he thought, compared to the magic Terry had wrought on Shaka. The man showed no trace of sadness or resentment, but rather, seemed to be rededicated to his job. Maybe, Wenders thought, this was his way of forgetting his loss — by losing himself in his work. It

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seemed to be astonishingly effective therapy.

One evening, Terry turned over in bed to face Joe. She looked at him with an odd expression.

"Do you *really* want to get into space, Joe? Ever?"

He grinned. "I'll tell you what space I want to get into —"

"I'm serious."

He frowned a gentle frown at her digression. "O.K. Yes. I do. And the shuttle seems to be—"

"The shuttle," she said with a sudden acidity, "is an overpriced pork-barrel example of welfare for the aerospace industry. They and NASA would be perfectly happy if we just screwed around with it on the ground and never made a single launch again. The only reason they *do* launch anything is to con the taxpayers into thinking something worthwhile is being done. Haven't you noticed how our launch schedules become more aggressive in an election year?"

"Honey, that's nothing new. We're all at the mercy of the people with the checkbook."

"Sometimes," she said, "I feel as if we're perpetrating the biggest fraud on the world. We talk about opening space to humanity, when in fact we'd never let ordinary people up there for fear someone would vandalize a spy satellite."

Joe ran a placating hand along her side. "Commercial space is opening—"

"Too slowly. Too *slowly*." She gazed at him intently. "Tell me you'd go into space if you could, Joe. Tell me that."

"You know I would. In a second."

"Tell me that you could leave this world behind without a second thought. Without any regrets."

"Only if you were by my side."

Tears welled up in her eyes. She clung to him desperately. "Tell me what you would give to go into space. To go *right now*."

"Anything, my love. Anything but my love for you."

She backhanded tears from her eyes. After a moment she said, "I want you to meet some people. People who want what we want. People who are ready to go into space *right now*. They think the shuttle is a dead end, and they've found their own way. Not a lot of bells and whistles and spaceships built by committee, but something cheap and simple. They're

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not interested in pushing technology to new limits or making aerospace companies rich; they just want to get into orbit with as many people as possible. And they're going to do it. I know they are."

Wenders knew about space-migration societies — they usually comprised a lot of teenagers with great vision but no means. A few years out in the world earning a living dampened their enthusiasm enough to disband most groups. He said as much to Terry, who shook her head.

"These people have taken irrevocable steps to prove their dedication. By anyone's standards. They've sunk their life savings into it. They've pledged their lives, fortunes, sacred honor, and much more. You've got to be willing to do the same."

"I am," he said in quiet seriousness. "I'd like to meet them."

"If you do, you must join us. We're nearing our launch date, and we cannot have anyone know about us who isn't ready to leave Earth with us."

"Where will we go?"

"Low-Earth orbit. About two hundred to three hundred mi—"

"I mean, where are we going to meet them?"

"I'll drive. It's a midnight meeting, so we can get there in plenty of time."

"*Tonight*?"

She nodded, rolling out of the low bed to the floor, where she walked a naked hand-by-hand to the dresser.

THEY DROVE up to a large one-story home in Melbourne Beach.

"That's it," she said, driving past it a block or two. "We try not to clutter the front with our cars." She killed the lights and headed for the back of the van. Wenders took a deep breath, let it out, and stepped out the passenger door into the dank night air. The beach nearby smelled of iodine and dead fish.

At the door, she reached to press a doorbell mounted low to be easily accessible. The door opened.

Wenders stared at the spectacled man opening the door. It was Shaka Verwoerd. He looked up from his wheelchair at Wenders, then at Delbert. "Welcome," he said.

"I see you've got the newcomer's job," Terry said to Shaka, wheeling herself into the room. Wenders followed.

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"I'm glad to feel a part of all this." Verwoerd closed the door behind Wenders. "They're in the den."

"Give me a push, will you, Joe?"

It was rare that she asked for help. Joe took the handles to guide the wheelchair through the hallway toward the rear of the home. All around them stood cartons filled with paper, bookcases crammed with books, note binders, blueprints, boxes of computer disks, and trays of microfiche. They turned a corner on the well-worn carpet and entered the den.

Thirty-five people sat in the room. In thirty-five wheelchairs.

Joe felt the same dizzy, stomach-wrenching sensation that had overwhelmed him when he first glimpsed Terry's lovely body ending at nothingness below the hips.

"I can't take this," he whispered to her.

"Yes, you can. You must."

"Welcome, Terry," said an older man facing the others. He had a shock of unrefulgent black hair that fringed a large bald spot on his head. From behind pilot-framed glasses, he smiled at the new arrivals. "Welcome, Mr. Wenders. Everyone, Terry has brought Joe Wenders as her guest tonight. Mr. Wenders works on the shuttle."

Joe nodded to the others, then noticed there was only one seat available, an empty wheelchair in the leftmost part of the front row. The speaker motioned toward it.

Wenders walked unsteadily to it and sat down with slow unease. The sheet of vinyl that served as the seat stretched under his weight. It felt uncomfortable and constricting. Terry wheeled up beside him.

"I was just informing the crew," the speaker said, "That we have a barge arranged for the launch, and that Ms. Steiner has made final arrangments for the liquid oxygen." He looked toward the back of the room. "What is the status of the solid rocket boosters, Mr. Taylor?"

A man with a pile of printout on what little lap he possessed said, "All three have been successfully mated to the first stage."

"Good," the speaker said. "Life support?"

A woman in the front row spoke up. "We've loaded enough lithium hydroxide to scrub the atmosphere for six weeks, which will enable hydroponics to be in full production for at least a two-week overlap. Also...."

The meeting dragged on for several hours. All that time, Wenders sat quietly in the wheelchair, fighting the urge to break and run. He knew

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what Terry would ask him when the evening was over. He knew, and his stomach churned at the thought.

"I cannot believe," he told her in the van, "that thirty-five people would *mutilate* themselves that way. Just to . . . to—"

"Just to embark on the greatest adventure of their lives? Of anyone's life?" Terry's voice possessed a sharp, almost scolding tone. "Some of us did not do this on purpose, you know. Some of us had the opportunity thrust upon us."

"Not Shaka, though, right?"

Terry shook her head. "No — he chose it freely. Happily."

"Did you convince him by seduction, too?"

Terry said nothing for several minutes, quietly steering the van through the night with tense concentration. When she finally spoke, her voice possessed a metered, forced calm.

"Legs . . . legs are useless dead weight. You just don't need them at all in space. So why bother taking them up there? By doing what we are doing, we can take *30 percent* more mass with us. More food, more life support, more *people*. We can build a larger community faster. We're not some cult of self-maimers — we're doing this only so that we can get up there. Our children. . . ." She paused to glance at Joe. "Our children will be born with legs."

The tightness that trembled in Wenders's guts refused to subside. "It's so sick," was all he could say.

Her voice grew ever sharper. "You *said* that you'd give *anything* to get into space. You *said* you'd give your *life*. What's so important about legs? I've *proven* to you that legs are unnecessary even on Earth — in space, they're an absolute *impediment*!"

For a long moment, she said nothing more; then she began to laugh. It was a harsh and bitter laugh. "*Impediment*," she repeated, shaking her head. "Even the language forces us to worship our legs."

She pulled into her parking space, squeezed the brakes sharply, and cut the ignition.

"You said you loved me."

Joe shook his head. "And if I love you, I should be willing to cut off my legs for you. Well, I—"

"Not for *me*," she said, turning toward him. "For *you*." In the darkness of

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the van, her green eyes still held enough light to pinion him with their gaze. "If you want to go into space, this is the only way to accomplish it in your lifetime. NASA would never put *you*, a mere citizen, into space. *We* will. But we can afford just one flight. Period. The life savings of over a hundred people are invested in this one chance to get away. Then we're either dead or we're up there for good — just as the first settlers turned their back on Europe for the dangers of the American wilderness. *No one else is offering you this.*"

"You can't ask me to do it."

"I told you," she said in a steady tone, "that if you went to this meeting, you would have to join us. An outsider cannot know what you know."

"Is that a threat?"

She pulled the keys from the ignition. "I'm not asking you for any sacrifice on your part. I'm *telling* you where I'm going and the conditions that would enable you to accompany me. If your love is strong enough, you'll be with me. Love lies in the heart, not in the legs." She regarded him again. "I love *you*. But do you expect me to abandon my dream and stay behind for you? If going into space is your deepest of dreams, follow it. Ask yourself again what you would give to live in space. And give yourself a *true* answer this time."

Joe climbed out of the van. "Now that I have a chance to make the decision," he said, "the choice is no longer clear."

He strode to his car and drove away. The predawn darkness shortly swallowed up the engine sounds, leaving Terry alone in silence.

WENDERS CAME to work that morning without sleep. He found it difficult to concentrate on the job at hand with so many conflicting thoughts and emotions battling inside him. Every person he looked at became a walking example of the importance of legs.

Legs made it simple to climb ladders, to run from station to station, to stand and work.

At lunchtime he stood in front of an exhibit for visitors and watched videos of astronauts at work in space. The Skylab astronauts used their legs quite a bit — to propel themselves from one wall to another, to anchor themselves, to exercise for their health. The astronauts aboard the cramped shuttle, on the other hand, twisted and turned to weasel their

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bodies in and out of narrow hatchways, tight turns, and crowded decks. They constantly yanked their legs along as cumbersome appendages.

He wandered back to work, as uncertain as before. Then, toward the end of the day, the announcement came through.

Wenders's supervisor — a short, balding man who had been with NASA since its Apollo glory days — pulled his team off their station and gathered them together on the scaffolding. From where he stood, Joe could gaze ten stories down at the activity on the floor. He caught a glimpse of the rolling silver that was Terry far below.

"We've just heard," the supervisor said, "that Congress failed to override the president's veto. For all intents and purposes, that cancels any further launches pertaining to the space station for the next fiscal year."

"Oh, great," muttered one of the workers. Sounds of anger and frustration reverberated elsewhere through the VAB.

"On the plus side," the supervisor continued, "that eases us up on pressure to meet the ten-launch schedule and puts us back to six for the next year. On the downside, of course, is this. . . ."

He waved a handful of envelopes.

"Most of you are used to this yo-yo by now. For you recent hires, though, well, suffice to say that NASA's a political football these days. Always has been. Senator Thurgood, though, has assured us that he will promptly introduce a bill next session mandating a significant expansion in the program." He glance down at the names on the envelopes. "Bailey, Carlton, Edwards, Hazeltine. . . ."

Joe Wenders, furloughed rocketman, sat on his couch — feet up, bourbon in hand — and stared at the photographs on his wall. Earthrise over the Moon. Ed White taking a space walk a few years before his death in *Apollo 1*. Buzz Aldrin standing on the lunar surface like a friendly polar bear. Judy Resnik in orbit, her lovely dark hair flowing weightlessly about, a free-fall mermaid oblivious to her ultimate fate aboard *Challenger*.

He wanted to live in space. He realized with a sickening clarity that the shuttle would never be the space truck NASA had once touted. It was not a Conestoga to the stars, but a finicky luxury limousine that demanded constant pampering lest it become a death trap.

He had listened to the reports given that night by the clandestine

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astronauts — they sounded more professional and far less jaded than NASA personnel. They sounded as if they could actually do it.

But they were insane!

He spent a long time considering the fanaticism that would impel seemingly intelligent, driven people to cut their bodies in two. An involuntary shudder passed through him. He took another drink.

It was the same as the religious fanaticism that drove people to renounce worldly possessions and move to communes. The mark of kinship here, though, was not a certain costume, or a tattoo, or a circumcision, or a brand — it was an irrevocable crippling. Even the settlers who traveled to America centuries ago had done nothing so radical. Some may have known they could never afford to return to their native lands. Some may even have sold themselves to indentured servitude in exchange for passage. But they never turned themselves into something less than human. . . .

That's wrong, Wenders thought. *She's still human. She proves that every day she survives as she is.* He could tell that the liquor was getting to him — his thoughts turned inward. The memory came of her in his bed. She was right. She did not need legs to be a complete human being *or* a total woman. And legs really *were* useless to someone living permanently in space. Anything a leg could do, an arm could do better in zero-g. And it *would* allow more people to go up —

Joe realized what he was doing: he was rationalizing. Convincing himself. He countered that with another slug of whiskey and an attempt to visualize Terry convincing Shaka to cut off his legs. Then he imagined her with the others he had met. He made her a seductress, a trickster, a lying slut. He made her the image of maniacal evil.

The image, though, refused to jell. This was the woman who built model rockets, who wanted to build a new world in space. She was not a destroyer. She was a force of creation.

He tried to envision what her legs might have looked like. Were they long and slender? Short and thick-ankled? That image would not appear, either; he could not imagine her whole. With legs, she would not be the woman she was. She would not be Terry Delbert.

He shuddered and swallowed the rest of his drink.

"We have to talk," he told her through the door. "I can't stop thinking

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about you."

Terry unlocked the door to let him in. "You've been drinking."

He turned to stare at her. He had obviously awakened her, for she wore nothing but a sheer black robe. Every line of her body was visible: her shoulders, her breasts, her waist, her hips. Even the scars where her legs ended.

He spoke quickly, his speech a little slurred. "I hate what you've done to those people. What you've convinced them to do to themselves. I hate this whole insane plan!"

"You're drunk," she said, grasping her robe at the neckline. "Please leave."

"And I hate NASA for the screwups and the lies and the kickbacks. I hate the way they strangled private ventures so that you had to come up with this mad, secret scheme."

"It's *not* mad!" she suddenly shouted. "Madmen don't concern themselves with trivia such as lift-off mass. They don't consider the consequences of their actions. I have! We all have! So should you. Think of the consequences of staying on this planet."

He stared down at her angry, defiant face. It was not madness he saw, but a grim determination, an intransigence that someone healthy and whole could never fully understand.

He bent to one knee and put his hands on the arms of her wheelchair. His voice weakened. "I hate the idea of you leaving me, of risking your life and dying in space. . . .

He paused for a long moment, searching her emerald eyes for some sign. He took a shallow breath. "Most of all, I hate the idea of you surviving, of you living there, forever out of my reach."

"You're not making sense," she said. "Are you saying you'd rather see me dead?"

"No," he whispered, laying his head on her lap and weeping. "I'd rather see *me* dead than be alive without you."

The rumble began quietly, the sound damped by the surrounding seawater. As the engines throttled up, the water appeared to boil furiously with the erupting gases that rushed to the surface. Like an angry dog, the rocket strained at its leash until explosive bolts cut the cable that held the spacecraft to its anchor weight.

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Free now — four engines and three solid boosters all at full power —the rocket rose upward. Its tail broke the surface, the plume of fire suddenly blasting steam and flame outward across the placid waters. In the early dawning light, it outshone the rising sun for one brief moment. It climbed faster, ever higher toward the half-moon overhead. Then it rolled and pitched, assuming an attitude that would take it into orbit.

Inside, Terry Delbert sat in her acceleration couch and broadcast a steady stream of announcements on a wide variety of radio frequencies, declaring to the world that they were a peaceful crewed spaceship posing no military threat. Her hair was cut short, as was the hair of the others, to lighten their payload weight by that many ounces.

Shaka Verwoerd, to her left, scanned radar to watch for hostile missiles or aircraft. None were visible — they had caught the government by surprise as intended.

"Passing max-Q," a voice called out as the ship shuddered.

It endured the period of maximum dynamic pressure beautifully, and responded to throttleup with a hearty pressure on the passengers as the hybrid solid fuel/liquid oxidizer engines blazed at full rated power.

Terry continued to repeat her long-rehearsed lines. All the while she, along with the others, thought about what they were heading toward —and what they had abandoned. She thought mostly of the people she had left behind. How long would they think about her, about the fact that she would pass two hundred miles above them every ninety minutes for the rest of their lives? How soon till this marvel became ordinary and accepted, perhaps even forgotten? She thought about old friends, old loves, of an old life slipping away from her at seven miles a second.

Without breaking the pattern of her radio speech, she reached a hand over to touch that of a man to her right.

Looking up through the viewing port, his skull clamped to the headrest by the force of their ascent, Joe Wenders gazed in frightened awe at the darkening sky. When stars suddenly appeared — bright, sharp, and ablaze with color — he forgot all about the acceleration and how it caused a mad tingling in the stitches beneath his bandages. He grasped Terry's hand firmly, sharing his tearful wonder and terrified joy.

He no longer thought of what he had given to go into space — he thought only of what he had gained.

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Jack C. Haldeman II (whose most recent books are a TOR double, Echoes of Thunder, *written with Jack Dann, and* Bill the Galactic Hero on the Planet of the Zombie Vampires, *written with Harry Harrison, and published by Avon) says he can't remember the genesis of "Lonesome Homesick Blues," but his friend and sometimes collaborator, Bill Nabors, does. "He says about ten years ago I showed him a blurry UFO picture and said it looked like a 1957 DeSoto hubcap," Jack writes. "He recalls I mentioned wanting to write a story where a bunch of people got together each year to trade blurry hubcap pictures and UFO stories. I promptly forgot about it and I guess the story bounced around my subconscious brainpan until it was ready to write. Bill read the manuscript before I sent it to you and assumed I'd remembered the conversation and had finally gotten around to writing the story. It wasn't until I got your letter and was scratching my head, trying to remember where the story came from, that he told me. I suppose some stories, like fine wines, need to age before they're ready."*

Lonesome Homesick Blues

By Jack C. Haldeman II

SURE, WE GET our share of kooks, but mostly it's just the regular kooks. Once a year, though, this place gets wild, and I'm cracking beers and mixing drinks from punch-in to punch-out. That UFO crowd can put it away.

I'm a decent barmaid, but it took a lot of work. Back home in Macon County, Georgia, all it takes to tend bar is to know how to pull the tab off a beer can. I've come a long way since then.

I've come all the way through mixology school to this bar in the Florida panhandle. Dave — he's my boss and owns the Wagon Wheel —won't allow any ferns in his bar, which tells you something about the place. On the other hand, this is no sawdust-on-the-floor honky-tonk,

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either. The Wagon Wheel's just a nice beach bar.

A well-stocked bar, too. Dave likes to have good stuff on hand — though, truth to say, there's not much call for it. Sure, Toni likes her scotch, and Larry is partial to rum and Cokes, but if I touch a bottle for one of the other regulars, it's usually for a shot of whiskey to go alongside their beer. I've got a bottle of Drambuie I opened six years ago, and I'm still waiting to pour the second shot. Forget umbrella drinks — though I *can* mix them — and the only time we use swizzle sticks is when the flying-saucer people come to town.

Don't get me wrong: I've got nothing against people who keep seeing little green men. I figure everybody's got to have something to keep them going in this hard life, and if what they got is mysterious lights in the sky and unexplained cow mutilations, who's to say that's so bad? It's a lot more harmless than Corvairs. My cousin Neil collects Corvairs. He's got about fifty junkers out on his farm, along with a bullet-ridden poster of Ralph Nader. All those clapped-out cars are good for is providing homes for rats, rattlesnakes, and other vermin. Not a one of them runs, and his neighbors rightly call them an eyesore and a health hazard.

But truth to tell, Neil comes out looking as normal as apple pie when you stack him up against some of the UFO crowd. More of them come every year, too. Used to be a small group, and they met at Stan's hotel up on Main. Now there are thousands of them, filling hotels all the way up toward Tallahassee. They all got a story to tell, and they'll tell it at a drop of a hat on any street corner or — unfortunately — bar. They can get plain strange at times, and I'd be lying if I said I didn't feel a bit of relief when most of them packed up and left on Monday.

Of course there are always stragglers, folks who just can't get enough and hang around looking for someone to talk to. Stretch is a straggler, but unlike most of them, he doesn't seem to be out to peddle his own particular lock on The Truth.

Stretch isn't his real name. Oh, he may have told me his name once, but if he did, it went in one ear and out the other. Some things go right past me. I'm real bad on names, so I just give everybody nicknames. I call him Stretch because he's a hair over seven feet tall. He's got sunken cheeks, and his eyes always look bloodshot. Stretch has beautiful hands and nice long fingers. I never ask him about basketball, because I understand some tall people take offense at that. He can't help being tall

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any more than Jeanette can help being short. People are different; that's all. I don't mind as long as they pay their bar bill and don't cause trouble. A tip once in a while doesn't hurt my feelings, either.

Stretch started coming to the saucer festival about five years ago. He comes early and stays late. As far as I know, he's never claimed to have been abducted to Jupiter or anything like that. He seems pretty normal. His drink of choice is Budweiser, and he tips a straight 15 percent. He was last in on Tuesday night. I imagine he's gone home by now.

I put a napkin at the end seat at the bar and opened a beer when I saw him come in on Tuesday. Stretch likes to sit at the end seat when it's available, on account of there's more legroom. It was certainly available, the only other customer being Toni, who was sitting in her usual booth, sipping scotch and reading a paperback Western.

"You dead-dogging it tonight, Stretch?" I asked him as he sat down.

"I beg your pardon?"

"Dragging the festival out. Hanging in there till the bitter end."

"Oh, I see. No, I was just looking for conversation."

"Well, you just missed Dingo and Miss Frizz." I call the woman Miss Frizz because she has the curliest hair I've ever seen. She's a fun woman and laughs a lot. I don't know why I called Dingo Dingo.

"Do I know them?"

"The couple from Alabama. The ones whose chickens lost all their feathers when the spaceship landed on their farm."

"I know them," laughed Stretch. "They claim their well went dry at the same time, and their dog forgot how to chase racoons. These hardly sound like phenomena one would normally associate with faster-than-light travel."

"I've heard stranger," I said. "A fellow here on Friday night claimed he's been to Venus. Says the streets there are lined with gold."

"Not true," said Stretch.

"I reckon not, or he'd have come back a rich man. He got into an argument with another guy who said everybody on Venus lives underground in big glass cities."

"I guess you hear a lot of stories here."

"Stretch, I hear 'em all. Martians to Moon Men. It could all be marsh gas as far as I know, but I do wonder about those strange circles in hayfields."

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"Dust devils," Stretch said, sipping his beer. "A normal atmospheric event, like a miniature tornado. I suspect some are farmers on their tractors, hoping to get their pictures in the paper."

"Oh, don't get me started on pictures. I've seen more blurry pictures of hubcaps than you'd believe. Some folks think other folks will swallow anything. Fellow even tried to pay his bar bill with a ball of crumpled-up tinfoil he said was part of a spaceship."

"Have you ever heard anyone describe a dull gray UFO about the size of a moving van?" Stretch asked. "Has two truncated wings on each end and hums while it hovers. Three small windows and a band around the middle that looks like wire mesh?"

"That sounds like a pretty dull flying saucer. Most people lean toward flashing lights and all kinds of special effects. Why do you ask? Have you seen one?"

"Not lately," he said. "But I keep looking."

"I hope you find it," I said politely, wondering if he was a nut case after all.

"I've got lots of time," he said, laying a ten-dollar bill on the bar and getting up. "It just gets lonely, though."

"Wait up, Stretch. You forgot your change."

"Keep it," he said. "I guess I'll see you next year."

I watched him duck as he went out the door. Strange man.

"Did you see his hands?" Asked Toni, coming up to the bar for a refill.

"Nice hands," I said. "I wonder if he's a basketball player."

"He's got extra joints on all his fingers," said Toni. "Never saw anyone like that before."

I never noticed. Some things go right past me.

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Our cover story, "The Swan" by Robert Onopa, is a science fiction story about a Southern California Harbor Inspector named Voorst investigating a rash of harbor fires in the Los Angeles area. A common enough practice, even today. But Voorst meets up with some strange characters and an ancient, mysterious sailboat . . .

The Swan

By Robert Onopa

THE COLUMN of black smoke was visible from ten clicks away, dense and billowy, shifting in the wind like a dye marker in ocean currents.

Photochemical colors in the twilight sky: mauve and filthy pink. The old Army turbocopter rattled through the airspace above coastal L.A., descending gradually toward the source of the smoke in Long Beach Harbor.

Standing in the open door of the copter's cargo area, one hand on a safety strap, Voorst squinted south through the haze at the continuous string of makeshift harbors where houseboats seemed every year to multiply like algae in a pond. He guessed densities of five or six thousand per square kilometer, half the rigs illegals, population out of hand.

The way the picture was never seen on CBS or VNN ate away at him like an ulcer. As they swung upwind of the column of smoke — it hung below them now three thousand feet like some fantastic butte in Monument Valley — he pulled himself across the cabin, took a deep

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breath, then leaned out the opposite cargo door, trying to make out what was going on near the source. The pattern of debris and smudge spread clearly from a large ship, one he maybe recognized: rusty white decks, an out-of-service pool, a blue hull — a passenger liner auctioned off years ago and anchored in the harbor as one of the transient hotels, the *QE III.*

The copter weaved down alongside the column; his stomach tightened, the sensation like floating down a precipice untethered. Now he could make out the big Virtual News Net uplink out on the breakwater. The shoreside traffic was gridlocked, the sea-lanes so crowded even a SoCal Harbor Inspector like himself (but what did Harbor Inspectors matter anymore?) had to hitch a ride through the air.

This was the third harbor fire in a week. One up in L.A. proper, the other down in Balboa.

A soft wall of black came rushing up, and they wafted into the smoke. In the darkness the copter's interior screens brightened, and he checked the image going out over VNN — he was used to the way they altered a landscape, accustomed to seeing some of the live-aboard scows bled out of the harbor shots, but now it looked like they'd moved the source of the fire, too. On the VNN screen, the smoke rose from a Brazilian bulk carrier anchored in the industrial harbor northwest. Voorst ground his teeth. The acrid edge to the air belonged to burning petrochemicals, not the cargo of Amazon mahogany whose loss the smooth-voiced anchorman was describing. Still, even the VNN summary screen showed the crowd — people with bundles, transients being driven off — fighting with Army cops. "Hey, Stringer," Voorst shouted against the whine of the turborotor. "*Stringer.* Your men gonna have the area secured by nightfall?"

The fiftyish sergeant, his name in block letters above the left pocket of his fatigues, seemed not to hear, didn't even open his eyes. He leaned against the bulkhead, the bank of internal screens glowing yellow behind him, and continued the story he'd started before Voorst had leaned out the door. "So I tell the lunchmeat I'm a friendly, right? I get her inside the troop carrier. There's nobody around. I get her on the floor in the back. . . ."

Voorst grunted and peered out as the copter punched beyond the dense smoke, the light like a change of season. Elevation two thousand feet. The dusty sun lay above the horizon less than an hour from setting. "If you don't get secured," he yelled to Stringer, "you're gonna have another three, four hundred dead by morning. Look down there; you can see them

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swarming — people in the water. . . ."

"Com'on," Stringer said. "Just listen: so when I take her blouse off. She's holding must be three hundred housing vouchers? I clap the restraints on her wrists, got 'em threaded around the weapons rack. Next thing I know, like her brain fuses; she goes twitch-wild. I think, well, the zimmer likes the restraints, right?" The copter lurched in a wave of heat; a red light flashed at the back of the cargo hold, matched by a flush infusing Stringer's square, hairless face. "I go to pull off my holster and belt?"

Only now did the Harbor Inspector, Voorst, look carefully at the mangled mass of cartilage at the side of Stringer's head. "Something tells me I don't want to hear how you lost it."

"I didn't *lose* my ear. She *bit* it off. I mean, what are these people turning into?" Stringer pulled himself up and peered out the open door, holding the safety rails so tightly his knuckles showed white. "Man, what *was* this place?"

"South of the industrial harbor, see? A big old passenger ship —Harbors database shows upper decks were a Sears-Daei Mall and a transit center, maybe two thousand people below. VNN's saying Nomads came aboard a bulk carrier, set a fire; the people in the harbor started looting. . . . Jesus, they treat people like cattle."

"Nobody treats *me* like cattle," Stringer grinned. "What's the matter, pal? You afraid my people gonna hit you with the prods?"

Voorst looked at him: red-eyed, one-eared. He took a deep breath: petrochemical air. "Stay out of my way, Stringer," Voorst said, trying to keep calm. "I've got a job to do down there, and I don't want your men interfering. Stay out of my way."

Voorst's job was to clear the harbor of illegal vessels. The first step was to identify the most dangerously unseaworthy craft, hulls he'd mark with his orange *V* for the Corps of Engineers to impound and sink along the massive net of breakwaters. Most of the few vessels that could actually sail had done so when the fire had broken out, just sailed north out of the harbor mouth to some other mooring. The illegals left behind ranged from slimy inflatables rigged as sleeping quarters, to makeshift houseboats with small kitchens, to old tanker hulls that had been converted into twelve-story "apartments."

Walking the docks, by sunset he found only six boats he could clear.

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Two hours later he heard an appeal from a group of unwashed men and women and let slide the regs for a dozen trimarans moored under the tattered flag of the Ponape Yacht Club. Even as they spoke, an illegal barge ghosted into an area he'd already inspected — the harbor changing amoebalike around him. Still, he'd see to it the worst cases were sunk.

At midnight, Voorst found himself picking his way across the deck of a converted cattle ship docked near the VNN uplink. Behind him the Corps was already towing the first hull he'd marked. Now he stopped to watch the Army drive a crowd along the shore back through the lurid light. The water was littered with clothing, cooking utensils, bedding; the red plastic of a toy Mars Rover crackled beneath his feet when he shifted his weight.

His heart went out to the people who needed a place to live, but what else could he do? When the big winter storms came slamming in from the Pacific, as they would in a month, the great breakwater itself a mile out wouldn't hold back the rising seas. Even in good weather, the utility hookups were rats' nests, and sewage fouled the waters for a click out. When the storms came, the collisions, capsizings, swampings — sheer overcrowding in the harbors killed thousands every year on this part of the California coast alone.

Voorst sighed, looked around to take his bearings. He'd covered all of the northern quarter of the harbor except for a crumbling pier near shore. He told himself that's where he'd quit for the night.

He walked over. He started writing off a string of listing hundred-foot hulks, sheet-metal and wallboard shacks on scow hulls, when he realized that one rusty hull, partly sunk, was blocking a dozen small boats moored to a pontoon dock along a hidden channel.

That's where he found the *Swan*.

SHE WAS an antique sailboat, a racing sloop from the twentieth century, Scandinavian-built, about forty feet on the waterline. He'd seen a boat like her in the museum in San Francisco once: a glass hull with fine, fast lines, a flush teak deck for quick sail changes, a tall mast with a narrow crosstree. Her gull-winged cockpit set her apart from other old racing boats and gave her away even from beneath a thick layer of grime. He'd never forgotten the words etched on the steel plaque in San Francisco: *Nautor Swan.*

This boat's reg numbers didn't show up on his readout. She certainly

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was run-down: filthy, her decks gouged, her brightwork the washed-out color of driftwood. Her winches were crusted over, and her rigging hung from the mast like an old spider's web. But there was no disguising the heartbreaking sleekness of her design.

"Hello!" Voorst called out from dockside, banging on the hull, hearing the fatigue in his voice. "Ahoy the *Swan*."

The boat had lost its rudder, seemed a bit low in the water. Still, he couldn't just have her sunk. He calculated his alternatives and started writing out a warning notice to post on the hull, when he heard the companionway hatch scrape open on its tracks. The hair rose on the back of his neck — in the red glow from a secondary fire, the harbor had turned weirdly quiet; he hadn't met anyone for an hour.

And now a girl emerged from the low cabin. She was wearing a T-shirt of a provocative blue beneath a khaki windbreaker. She was slim-hipped, high-cheeked, and pretty, but certainly just a girl. He guessed from the look on her face that she would have disappeared had she anywhere to go.

"Are you Army?" she said. Her skin was smooth as a mannequin's. Her hair was honey-colored despite the Oriental fold in her eyes and the flatness of her nose — someone's exotic, beautiful daughter.

"SoCal Harbors Office. Where's your family?"

"I'm older than I look," she told him, lips tight. "Try twenty-two. Are you going to squander all the boats in the harbor? The way you did up in Seattle?"

He grunted. "Who told you that?"

"Everyone knows about it. There's a pinch, the boats get condemned. The next thing you see, they're sunk at anchor. Then the bay gets filled in by some developer, and apartment blocks go up."

The story bothered him, too. The trouble in Seattle, as he recalled, had been a petrochemical slick that had unfortunately ignited at the turning of the tide. "We're not sinking anybody at anchor," he told her. "You're mistaking me for the FedHarbors people. But for your own safety. . . ."

His pager squawked, and he stopped, took a messaage from ComNet: FEMA had scheduled a briefing at the fire's source on Dock G North at 0600.

He'd had to look down to read the message display and to shut his pager off. When he looked back up, the girl was gone.

* * * *

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At the morning briefing — he'd been right about the source, it was the *Queen Elizabeth III*, a floating flophouse belowdecks, the mall above —the Long Beach fire chief showed Voorst and the Army Evac Team where the blaze had started in the video department of the Daei store, around 4:00 P.M. on the previous day. Someone had set off a case of Lydex, the Army's "sticky napalm," fragments of the original container blown out into a passageway.

The Lydex — left over from the "police action" in Mexico — was the signature of the New Nomad Terrs, Stringer chimed in during his five minutes: Stringer was apparently something of an expert on the terrorists, Voorst was surprised to learn. Stringer's assistant placed the disruption to the *QE III*'s ComNet channel at 1602 hours.

"So they lost video uplink from this ship from the *start!*" Voorst asked.

A black firewoman from Long Beach shook her head. "No way."

Stringer looked annoyed. "That's what the scum do first, blow the links, give you false signals," he said, but the black woman only shrugged.

Voorst waited until the briefing was concluded and Stringer and his team drifted away.

"Show me," Voorst said to the firewoman in the yellow slicker.

Up forward, in the old first-class theater, one of the Virtual News Network's "experience" rooms was still more or less in working condition, running three walls out of four. Voorst played back the holotape of what had gone out over the Net even before they'd flown out from Malibu, cutting the volume on the anchorman Tachikara's familiar, avuncular voice. There it was again: the *QE III* fire was already superimposed on the Brazilian bulk-cargo carrier, the *Sea Angel*, anchored in the industrial harbor just northwest. He'd seen that harbor choked with live-aboards, too, as they'd flown over, but as he watched the walls around him projecting VNN's three-dimensional coverage, half the residential boats were gone, erased, digitalized out. Even the odor of the fire they were sending out over the Virtual Net was different, yes, incense-sweet, a hint of burning wood from the tropics.

He supposed they had their reasons. Maybe the police had a lead on the Nomad Terrorists, which would be blown if everyone knew the truth. Still. . . .

"You believe this shit, what they do nowadays?" Voorst asked the black woman.

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She seemed rapt — on the screen, against the dramatic sights and sounds of the fire, a guy wearing a red bandanna was pulling a comatose, seminude blonde out of water so oily it threatened to ignite. "This is better than what happened, man. I like this better."

Behind the slosh of the water and the crackle of flaming lumber and paint blistering a hatch, an announcer murmured the station ID for VNN: *"Here's There!"* he said. *"You're Here!"* Voorst picked up the unerased string of scow hulls as part of the background on a side screen. Without giving it much thought, he called up the screen controls and instructed the virtual-reality program to zoom in.

You could hardly see the edit lines. Blue shirts swarming near a derelict sailboat. The *Swan*.

"Hey," the firewoman said, "lookit that. Maybe those're the guys who started the fire."

Voorst shrugged. "Look at their bedrolls. Folded in a hurry. Look how those two are half-dressed, how their survival packs are a mess. That bunch is clearing out like they don't know what's going on."

The Corps of Engineers had already brought in two large cranes, and now a dredge from the nearby Naval Shipyard was stationed in the harbor mouth. The harbor looked trashed — debris strewn, littered with derelict vessels, scum on the water thicker than usual — but because the Army'd come in strength, the transients weren't swarming back as they had in Balboa, so today his own job seemed less urgent. Voorst ate a late breakfast with the Long Beach fire crew, a druggie bunch who shared Stim tabs with their coffee. Then he worked the Alamitos end of the bay out of a Zodiac for a while. Before long his eyes were burning from some toxicity in the air. He moored the Zodiac at an empty slip and walked over to the *Swan*.

The Eurasian girl was kneeling on deck, scrubbing corrosion from a winch with a wire brush. The boat was still grimy, black-streaked along the waterline from the frayed truck tires used as fenders, but metal fittings shone along the route of the starboard running rigging.

"It's a start," Voorst said.

She grinned nervously. On the mast she'd posted the Provisional Seaworthiness Certificate he'd left on deck the night before. "I'm obliged for the thirty days," she said.

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Voorst nodded toward the scow hull blocking the channel. "That hulk should be towed out tomorrow."

Now her smile relaxed. "Fntastic," she said. "That's the one problem I could never solve. I've got propulsion — a set of metal-film sails that've never seen wind, a cranky methanol inboard. . . ."

He couldn't quite place her accent: was she a refugee from the fall of Hong Kong? He was impressed, as she went on, by what she knew about sailing, by her ambition to take the boat out single-handed. "What are you going to do for a rudder?" he asked.

She told him the original rudder was at the bottom of the harbor, just below the stern. "It's a long story. My old boyfriend . . ."

". . . left when the fire started on the *QE III*," Voorst told her. "You can see that on the VNN tape."

Now it was her turn to be surprised. "I'm the one who found this boat to begin with," she said. "Stuck this way, filled with a dead man's kip. All Dana did was lose the rudder when he tried to make room for a stabilizing vane he never did attach."

"So what are you going to do about the rudder?"

"Dive for it," she answered, grimacing at the slimy water.

Voorst nodded. "You're going to need some help."

She flushed, started to say, *No, I don't*, but something in her peripheral vision caught her attention. Voorst tracked her line of sight to a moving group a hundred meters away, above the debris-strewn beach, near a barricaded ramp to the docks: an Army patrol was prodding along fifty or sixty people dressed in the dingy old clothes of the homeless. The sergeant sauntering behind them hefted on his shoulder the distinctive barbed shape of a burn gun, the cruelest of weapons.

Now the infrared gun was waved, in a familiar way, at Voorst. He spit into the dark water.

"I'm sorry I thought you were one of them," the Eurasian girl said.

Voorst ran his hand over a piece of coaming, thinking it just needed to be scraped, sanded, and coated to look like new. During the night he'd dreamed of the *Swan* far out at sea, beyond the greasy slicks and floating carcasses, heeled over in a stiff, open-ocean breeze, riding blue-white swells like a wild horse running through the clean hills of the forever-lost open land where now so many hundreds of millions lived. "Well, if you need some help, I'd like to see this boat saved, see? I'd like to see you sail

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out of here."

"Look," she said, still watching the patrol on shore. "Those soldiers make me nervous. You might as well come aboard."

Voorst stepped over a sagging lifeline and followed her down the companionway, not expecting much. But he found antique wood paneling, blue curtains shading the ports, a spotless galley. The beamy cabin was a museum of old-time comforts like teak bookracks and built-in lockers. From the oversize electronics at the aft nav station, he guessed that the boat had last been seriously cruised fifteen years before, around the turn of the twenty-first century. "My name's Rawley Voorst," he told her.

"So I gathered from the notice. I'm Tiana Parker."

He saw the T-shirt she'd been wearing the previous night on the forepeak bunk. "Isn't it kind of dangerous to wear Nomad blue?"

She shook her head. "They're just people without places to live, for Christ's sake."

"Or people who set fires with Lydex."

"If you believe that. . . ."

"It's not a religion," he said. "It's not a matter of belief." He realized he was repeating sentences he'd heard electronically, and caught his breath. "You must watch CBS or VNN. You must listen to journalists like Tachikara. . . ."

"I suppose you believe everything you see on VNN?"

"No. . . . This is what I mean: they can manipulate the screens, but an anchorman like Tachikara with a reputation to protect, he's not going to fabricate. . . ."

"Unless he's a *construct*, unless *he's* fabricated himself by the Crays at VNN every day. Tako Tachikara. Christ."

He'd heard rumors. "VNN," he sighed.

"The technology's a miracle," she admitted, pulling off her work shirt, uncovering a sleeveless top and skin that glowed gold in the warm cabin light. "You know what would be splendid? Get some of that equipment, put it to use for human things. You know, people's memories. . . . Make a holotape of teaching a child how to walk, or fixing this boat up." She leaned back against a bulkhead. "But they never let ordinary people get their hands on the equipment."

"They know how dangerous it would be to turn an unedited camera on the cardboard shacks of East L.A. . . ." In the silence after he spoke, he

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could feel the hull bob gently from some disturbance in the harbor.

"I'd be very grateful if you did help me," she said.

He thought he heard somone knocking around outside. "What do you need?" he asked her.

"For starters, do you know how to mend an electronic compass?"

Footsteps sounded above on deck. Voorst pulled himself up the companionway to find that the weapon-waving sergeant who'd been hiking on the shore, and who'd made his way, alone, across the littered beach, through a barricade, and across a series of jammed-together decks to land on the *Swan*'s, was someone he knew.

"Hi," Stringer said, looking past him to the girl, smiling unctuously. "Hi, zimmer."

"Jesus," Voorst said. "You're gonna get your other ear bitten off."

"Gimme a break," Stringer said. "I've been up all night. My own men are startin' to smell as bad as the people we move," He smiled at Tiana, looking down into the cabin. "Nice in there."

She only nodded, fear in her eyes.

"We're here to protect you, see. I'm Sergeant Stringer. Where you goin' when Rawley throws you off your boat?"

"I wasn't aware he was," she said.

Stringer nodded sympathetically. "Well," he said, "you are now." He rubbed the stubble on his chin. "We're like brothers, see. . . ."

"Like Cain and Abel," Voorst laughed.

Now Stringer bit his lip. "Who the fuck're they?"

Voorst shook his head. "Abel was a shepherd — say, Sergeant, does that make him the first Nomad? Anyway — you'll like this part — his brother, Cain, murdered him."

"Well, hey," Stringer said, "people do get pissed off, right? Anyway, lunchmeat, get your pack. Ol' Sergeant Stringer's gonna take you in for a while."

"Don't listen to him," Voorst told her. "He's got two sexual-assault convictions. One more and he's gelded. That's not a chance he's going to take."

"Zimmer still needs a place to sleep."

"Can't you read the Provisional Certificate on the mast?" Voorst asked with flat menace. "She's got as much right to stay here as you do in the West Hollywood Barracks. Or should we have a talk with

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your parole officer?"

Stringer flushed. "You can't pull that shit on me. This whole coast's goin' to be wasted before thirty days. Not even a duck's goin' to float here. Believe me."

"What are you talking about?"

"I'm sayin' you don't know shit," Stringer told Voorst with a sweaty grin, swinging back up the companionway.

LIKE A graceful creature emerging from a chrysalis, Voorst thought when he returned the next day to see that the afterdeck had been scrubbed and oiled well enough for the grain of its teak planking to emerge. Up forward a stay of bright new wire supported the mast, and the bowsprit was freshly painted bright red.

"I couldn't sleep properly," Tiana admitted. "I kept thinking he'd show up again."

Voorst told her he knew his man; it wouldn't happen.

"What's in the crates?"

With the scow hull towed away, he'd been able to motor the Zodiac into the channel. He'd cannibalized, off one of the half-sunk tugs, a speech-synthesized nav system. He stepped down and passed it up to her with a set of alloy turning blocks and a coil of fresh synthetic line. He saved what he considered his real triumph for last, a shoulder-mounted, double-lensed apparatus in a padded aluminum case.

"That's registered VNN gear," she murmured. "Where in the world. . . ."

"I had a little help from a friend. Someone in the Long Beach Fire Department. It's a portable unit got left behind at the *QE III* site."

He'd set aside the afternoon to help her work. Even playing with the holocam, with just a few additional repairs, a seaworthy boat started taking shape. They spliced new line onto the frayed end of a jib halyard and fed it through the masthead pulley to set up the running rigging. Voorst free-dived with weights into the murky water and found the rudder — which Tiana pulled up and he reattached with new alloy pins. Amid a floating patch of food waste and filth, he scoured the harbor's muck from the hull with ultrasonic gear. By the time she had the tiller box packed with lube and turning freely, he defilmed and scrubbed his own skin. If the Nomads who'd been on the boat were anywhere nearby, he saw no sign of them, or of Stringer. The harbor was strangely quiet, the air

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still throughout the hot afternoon.

When Voorst set the boom in the old gooseneck, sweat dripping from his eyebrows, he looked up to find she'd focused the holocorder on him.

"The boat, Tiana, the boat."

She set the camera down with a smile. "Dinnertime," she said.

In the west the sun was indeed low in a sky feverishly bright with unnatural pastels.

In the cabin below, a sturdy foldout table occupied the center of the U-shaped settee adjacent to the galley. She served him warm cabbage soup, brown bread, and soy cakes, what he was sure Stringer would call Nomad food, just the diet of the poor.

At dusk, Voorst ran a line for the topping lift through the masthead and attached the bitter end to the boom. "Look this over," he told Tiana. "You're ready to hoist your sails." As she tested the rig, he faced the harbor; the sky in the west had taken on an ugly, bruised quality, and in the gathering darkness, fifty or sixty dim lights marked where families had reboarded illegal ships; he could hear muted voices and the dull metallic sounds of secret dinners being prepared. "I guess electronics are next," he said. "I'll be back in the morning."

She put a tanned hand on his forearm. "Please stay. Stay the night."

She had intelligent eyes, coal black, and she was wearing a woman's scent. When he thought about the trip up to Malibu and his sleeping cubicle at the barracks, his bones just felt heavy. What was in Malibu? Three or four hours of VNN risk games stuck in a room with fifty soldiers plugged in like electronic components and breathing bad air.

Tiana didn't seem like just a girl anymore. While he took his second shower of the day, she initiated sex like a woman of experience. Afterward, in the forepeak bunk, she fell asleep, her arm across his naked chest. Only then did she appear vulnerable, as delicate as the small bones on the inside of her wrist. "*Who are you?*" he whispered in the quiet of the night. Voorst could sense the distant rhythm of the open ocean through the *Swan*'s hull, the rising and falling of the swells. The sleep into which he fell was dreamless, deeper than he'd had in years.

On Friday morning the explosions started at eight sharp, just as Voorst was punching up the code for dispatch to schedule his day's work for SoCal Harbors.

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The concussions shook the air, sloshed water up the dock pontoons, sent debris and smoke a hundred feet high across the southern end of the harbor. Voorst braced himself against the ComNet dish he'd only just bolted onto the stern.

Another set of concussions — like a giant walking heavily along the far edge of the harbor.

Tiana looked up from the stanchion she was cleaning, gripping it tightly with one hand, breathing deeply.

"Not an accident," he said. "Look at the color of the smoke. It's white. I don't think it's an accident." When dispatch came up on the pager, he told them to put him through to the FEMA office. He was using the ComNet dish he'd just installed as an uplink, noticed idly that it worked fine.

Sweat stung his eyes as he listened.

"There are people on those boats," he told the FEMA administrator. "I saw them last night." The argument was brief, punctuated by another pair of concussions.

"What *is* it?" she begged when he started throwing his gear together. Onshore a crowd of homeless had gathered to watch the smoke. They were passive, listless — even though the Army was surely on its way with prods.

"The Corps of Engineers condemned the south end of the harbor," he told her.

Her eyes widened with recognition. "The explosions. They're sinking the boats at anchor. They drive the people out, sink their boats, fill in the harbor for apartment blocks. . . . It's like Seattle."

"Not quite," he insisted. "There's no petrofire here. The main channel is clear. There's no cause for what they're doing. I'm going up to Sacramento and stop those bastards."

"Don't leave me."

"It's my job," he said. "Look: the Corps's finished for the day. At the rate they're working, you're safe at this end of the harbor for weeks. I'll be back tomorrow. It's my job, Tiana — everybody else is lying about this —FEMA, the Army, FedHarbors, VNN, the Corps of Engineers. I've got to try and stop them."

Up in Sacramento he had to endure hour-long waits on worn-out chairs in Interior Department reception rooms whose false-landscape windows

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shimmered painfully with waterfalls and snowy mountains. Accumulated errors in their virtual-reality programs — entire sections dropped out of forests and cliffs, pixels burned sickening shades of blue-green — made his eyes water. The bureaucrats in their gray offices, speaking their foggy language, made his temples ache. But by the end of the day, meeting with the California Harbormaster himself in his office in the capitol, Voorst felt vindicated. The balding man's window wall might continue to display its retouched version of San Francisco Bay, but he agreed:

The harbor at Long Beach was SoCal's largest facility, an irreplaceable resource. The Corps of Engineers data was faulty.

With the help of Lieutenant Governor Yasubu, at seven in the evening, the Army Corps of Engineers was ordered, through Fed Interior, *to cease demolition forthwith, pending disclosure that the harbor was unnavigable due to wreckage, blocked channels, or fully documented siltation.*

Voorst dined with the balding man, an old tanker captain, in the executive cafeteria; afterward it was too late for a lift back to Malibu, so he accepted a barracks cubicle for the night. Stretching out on the narrow cot, Voorst felt exultant. The fantasy he'd entertained on his way up to Sacramento that morning, the fantasy of turning back and sailing the *Swan* to the South Pacific with Tiana, now seemed petty and selfish. The South Pacific had its own problems anyhow, a vast archipelago irradiated by the French, a toxic zone below Johnston Island where a nerve-gas-disposal facility had failed.

Even when the *Swan* was fully refitted, he might not miss sailing away with her after all, wherever she was headed, he thought.

Until he found a holotape tucked into the bottom of his duffel.

He searched out an empty VNN experience room at the base Officers' Mess. The tape she'd slipped among his work clothes was the footage they'd shot working on the *Swan*. Alone in the room, he could feel the pastel sun, smell the salt in the air through the rot from debris, almost touch her as she moved, smiled at the camera, waved, her almond eyes bright with life. And in just a week, the *Swan* had been transformed from a derelict hull into a beautiful creature of the sea.

He worried about her now, worried, too, about unfinished odds and ends on the boat: a loose hatch cover, frayed wiring on the inboard. Why had she given him the holotape — unless she intended to sail away later that morning?

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At 4:00 A.M., his pager screamed its high-pitched alarm, the sharp sound of grief itself.

He identified himself to the dispatcher as the Harbors Officer on call with SoCal Red Team.

Yes, he was responsible for Malibu and the coastline to the south. Yet another harbor fire, he was told, coordinates forthcoming. His heart thudded unnaturally in his chest until he heard that he'd be joining Sergeant Rodriguez in turbocopter four.

Then he felt relieved.

Rodriguez worked the San Diego sector exclusively, two hundred clicks south of Long Beach. He never shared Stringer's territory. So if the Army team was going to be led by Rodriguez, they'd be headed down toward the border, to Encinitas or San Diego itself. As for another fire . . . statistically, it was overdue.

They put him on a jump jet, and he caught the turbocopter at Malibu base, out at the end of the breakwater, just as he had a week before. The actual sight of Rodriguez, plump and muttering to himself as usual, was comforting. Voorst tried to sleep; he'd been able to doze on the jump jet, dreamed a dream of the *Swan* more vivid than the experience he'd had in the VNN room. But now he couldn't get it back.

Rodriguez shook him awake only minutes out of Malibu.

The column of black smoke was visible from ten clicks away, dense and billowy, shifting in the morning wind like a dye marker in ocean currents.

Photochemical colors in the sunrise sky: mauve and filthy pink. The old Army turbocopter rattled through the airspace above coastal L.A., descending gradually toward the source of the smoke.

"Hey, where we goin'?" Voorst asked Rodriguez.

"Look for y'self. Long Beach. Don' you guys ever know nothin'?"

"What do you mean, Long Beach? That's Stringer's territory. What would you be doin' going to Long Beach? Where's Stringer?"

"Stringer, the guy's *totally fucked and gone, man*," Rodriguez laughed against the noise.

Voorst swung up to the open door of the copter's cargo area, one hand on a safety strap, squinting south through the haze at the string of makeshift harbors, the thousands of houseboats and makeshift live-aboards. Now he could see the black cloud rising from Long Beach Harbor

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all right, from a broad sector of the main channel. A huge vessel was blocking the harbor mouth. The *QE III* was bow-down, sinking.

"Jesus. *What* about Stringer? *What do you mean!*"

"Jus' look at this," Rodriguez laughed on, punching up a secondary mode on the copter's VNN summary screen. "'S a replay, eight minutes' worth. Pix turned up on VNN real time two hours ago, nobody sayin' how. Jus' look at the asshole."

The first shaky images showed Stringer in a skiff towing a commando float loaded with cases of Lydex.

Someone must have fed illegal footage into the VNN broadcast loop. It was an exposé.

The grainy night shot showed Stringer with his own hands using magnetic grapples to secure the massive charge to rusty plates behind the man-thick anchor chain hanging from the bow of a massive ship. A blue hull. The *QE III*.

Stringer dumped fuel from the skiff. Then he fended off, igniting the pilot fire of petrochemicals, turning finally, shock and recognition in his eyes as he saw the camera, the side of his face gruesome, the wrong side of his face bloody in the orange light. His other ear was gone now, his temple stringy with cartilage and slick with gore. . . .

A gaff thrown like a harpoon hit him in the chest as he tried to step away, knocked him to his knees at the gunwale. . . .

In the foreground of the shot, Voorst recognized the deck of the *Swan*, swarming with blue shirts, the red bowsprit gleaming in the lurid glow.

And he recognized the tanned hand trembling on the tiller, the small bones on the inside of a wrist as delicate as a girl's. The screen showed the Lydex igniting, a sun spinning into a whirlpool of light, bleaching the screen into fine atom snow, a vision of white light so pure that time, for a moment, seemed to stand still.

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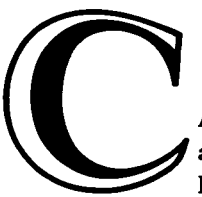
James Lawson grew up in California and has a College Teaching Certificate in Communications Arts and Printing. After traveling extensively on work for the U.S. Army, where he worked directly with two lieutenant colonels, he left the military. He is currently an independent consultant who recently completed work to help launch a major new computer system for an international company. He has sold two other Montezuma Strip stories, one to Amazing Stories *(which was picked up by Gardner Dozois's sixth Best of the Year anthology) and another to appear in a future issue of F&SF.*

HEARTWIRED

A Montezuma Strip Story

By James Lawson



AN' YOU DO NOTHIN' about the little null, Paco? He makes me nervous, the way he lookin' at me tonight."

Her neg glanced back down the street. Sure enough, the kid was still trailing them, his big puppy eyes focused forlornly on Paco's main pos. But the monsoon had stopped for the *noche*, it was an under forty-d night, and he was feeling expansive.

"Just ignore him, 'Nita. All the guys stare at you the same way."

"Yeah, but they just look. They don' follow me around."

He slipped his arm around her waist and pulled her close. "He's harmless. Hey, if it's really bothering you, I'll get rid of him, but he's handy to have around sometimes. Like a shorter in your pocket. Think of him like that; like a tool."

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"I guess it doesn't matter." She smiled at her neg. Paco was big, almost as big as Contrario, and certainly the handsomest member of the Teslas. And he'd picked her to be his pos. She leaned against him, feeling the tautness of his body beneath the shirt, content as they splashed through the puddles deposited earlier in the day by the intense July storm, her charged boots keeping her feet and legs dry. Negs, and poses side by side, the gang marched cockily up the street, commandeering the sidewalk from regular citizens as they kept a wary watch out for other ninlocos.

Wormy G hung five meters back, keeping close to the armor glass of the storefronts, savoring each glimpse of Anita up ahead. In his heart he knew he was the only one, the only male on the planet who truly appreciated her. To him, she was more than merely attractive; she was a logarithmic sculpture, the essence of beauty, a magnet for all that was good and fine and clean in this sordid world. He knew that his existence barely impinged on her consciousness, that she hardly knew he was alive. It did not matter. *He* was aware of *her*.

She was the sun: intense, life-giving, pulsing with warmth and light. He was content simply to orbit her.

And there was the little secret they shared.

When by chance her gaze happened to encounter him, her expression invariably turned to one of disgust or indifference. He couldn't understand why. So he wasn't a sinewy elemental force like Paco, but neither was he invisible or disfigured. Nor was he a spacebase junkie. It puzzled him how after having shared their secret for so long, she could continue to ignore him so utterly.

He did understand why they wouldn't let him into the gang. While he wanted desperately to belong, he didn't fit the image of a ninloco. He was too sane, too respectful of reason and logic, if not convention. They let him hang around because his knowledge of locks and vorecs was sometimes useful, because he could build and repair the gadgetry and toys that the gang frequently acquired by illegal means. He was tolerated, but not liked. He ignored their snickering insults because it was the only way he could get close to Anita.

There were at least a dozen gangs that called Puerto Penasco home. The Teslas and Newts, the Comenciados and Vitshines along with the Sangres and Orotoros were the best organized, the ones sane enough to hang together for more than a month at a time without self-destructing. The

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other disintegrated and reformed regularly, sometimes under entirely new names. They lived in a condition of colloidal anarchy, battling among themselves as often as with rivals. This made it tough on the local federales, since a gang member one week might metamorphose into an independent skim artist the next.

A blue cruiser went by, its powerful electric engine humming threateningly. Several members of the gang waved gaily at the feds inside. They knew they were invulnerable. You couldn't arrest somebody for being a member of a gang. It would violate the Thirty-eighth Amendment, or some legal thing like that.

Of course, they could hassle you. Nothin' in the Thirty-eighth Amendment against hasslin', omber. Maybe it was the heat, maybe they weren't in the mood, but, for whatever reason, the feds chose not to bother the Teslas that night. Hassling in the heat was no fun, and it was the dead middle of the July Sticky.

Wormy G did not hate Paco. Hate was a mature emotion to be visited only on worthy targets. It would've been wasted on a brain-damaged blob of steroidal mush like Anita's misbegotten neg.

He did envy him his gang tattoo; the electrified coil that danced across his tricep, spitting tattooed blood and sparks. It was too expansive to fit on Wormy's thinner arm, but would look nice on his chest. He'd thought of getting one there and keeping it hidden, like the secret he shared with Anita. His own private gang emblem. A laser wash would take it right off if it were discovered.

What stopped him was the knowledge that Paco and his fellow ninlocos wouldn't allow him the luxury of a wash. They'd choose to remove it themselves. Slowly, with sharp knives, if they found the emblem on him or anyone else not anointed a member of the gang. So he continued to savor the idea while passing on the reality.

He turned off the mike in his cap and fingered the vorec in the pocket of his shorts. If Anita would put on her Muse lenses, he could send her a song. He tried to gauge her mood. Sometimes she listened, but there were nights when she complained to Paco. Usually Wormy chose to take the risk. Because when Paco and the others were beating him up, he was closer to Anita. Such beatings were hardly ever dangerous. Only painful. It was no fun beating on someone who just hung limp in your hands and didn't even try to get away. Weird. Almost weird enough to qualify for admission

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to the Teslas.

They hung around Gordo Mike's until late; snacking on ray satay, frijoles, and grouper mole, sneering at the cleanroomies with their oh-so-tricked-out dates. Tomorrow the cleanies would vanish, sucked as if by a giant corporate vacuum back into the hi-tech plants that lined the Bahias de Adair and San Jorge, there to labor churning out products and components for the multinats that were the reason for the Montezuma Strip's existence.

Big money, hi-tech, cheap labor. The Strip drew people from all over Namerica and points south; anybody who could fly, ride, walk, or crawl to the border. Nursing a crop of doped gallium arsenide or microbio storage proteins paid a helluva lot better than growing corn and potatoes.

Beneath the immense service sector that kept the cleanies happy were the parasites, and below them the undefinables like the ninlocos. The crazyboys. Wormy G brushed stringy black hair off his eyes. Maybe he couldn't match Paco's strength, but at least he kept himself clean.

They didn't have to get rid of him. He knew when it was time for him to fade into the shadows, when his presence began to become an embarrassment to them. He didn't much feel like taking a beating, either, so he left early, frustrated at having been unable to gift Anita with one of his compositions. But she'd never donned her Muse lenses, the thick glasses that delivered vits and sound to eyes and ears. Not in a musical mood tonight. So there would be no sharing of secrets, no interruption of regular programming by the arduously constructed broadcast unit he carried in his pocket.

Sometimes, out of curiosity, she listened. His lyrics were platitudes, uninspired if feverish. He was better at the music, good enough to hold her interest if she was sufficiently bored or indifferent.

Those brief moments, however impersonal, were a form of contact. Wormy playing, broadcasting just for Anita. It was what he prayed for, what he lived for, every day.

He made his way through the night lights and the screaming laser ads and drifting holos that implored him to buy, try, don't be a null-lined guy, down to where the towering codos lined the beach. The factories and assembly plants and research facilities lay to the north and east, the beach having been reserved for the cleanies who could afford to live facing the waters of the Golfo Californio instead of the dry inland desert.

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The surrounding security gates kept out the likes of thieves and muggers, but not Wormy G. It wasn't hard to get in. The system was verbally cued. The voices of individual codo owners keyed the gates. Wormy had spent a couple of days with an absolutely faz specially rebuilt Siemens modified directional mike recording the voices of codo owners as they came and went. After that, it took no time at all to install selected settings in his voice-recognition unit.

He approached a side gate, checked to make sure the night patrol wasn't around, and keyed the vorec. Out came the voice of a plump, middle-aged mask sculptor. The gate analyzed, acknowledged, and popped. He made sure to close it tight behind him.

Down under the massive concrete pilings where damp sand stunk of dead sea-things, paint cartridges, spraywall buckets, and salt-resistant polycarb binders, his boat lay concealed beneath a tarp stained with crusted liquid waterproofing. He hit the battery-powered pump and waited for it to inflate. Two minutes later he was dragging it out onto the beach, gazing at the Christmas lights of the towering codos that lined the coast all the way down to Guyamas.

There was little wave action this far up the Gulf. Salt water slapped his legs as he pushed the inflatable into the water.

Jumping aboard, he turned to activate the tiny electric motor. It wheezed to whispery life and pushed him seaward. It wouldn't make much speed, but he was in no particular hurry. His destination lay more than a hundred kilometers nearer than the cross-Gulf town of San Felipe.

Like a fiery medieval fortress, the Puerto Penasco desalinization plant loomed out of the dark water on immense pilings, adrift on an onlooker's imagination like something from another world. It groaned and complained, the vast metallic guts emitting prehistoric sonorities. It looked as if at any minute it could abandon its footing deep within the sands of the Gulf to stride toward the land, like some monster from an ancient entertainment vit, to smash the codos and their inhabitants to pulp and rip apart the factories that stretched north along the highways.

The plant and others like it supplied fresh water to the states of Sonora and Arizona and the industries they supported along the southern portion of the Strip.

Beneath the plant itself, clinging to the near impenetrable jungle of intake tubes and valves, switching pumps and cleaning stations and

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filtration tanks, were isolated habitats. Thrown together out of scavenged wood and metal and plastics, they were home to those few individuals independent and resourceful enough to eke out an existence underneath the facility.

If you could work fast enough and camouflage your place well enough to avoid the attentions of company security, you had access to free sewage in the form of the Gulf below and plenty of fresh water, which could be unobtrusively drawn off from the check taps on the major pipes that snaked toward the beach from the east side of the plant.

There was food, too. Fish congregated near the surface, away from the disorienting sonics that made underwater life around the deepwater intakes untenable. Except for the threat of an encounter with security, you were safe. But you had to like the salt smell of the Gulf, the perpetual dampness, and be able to tolerate the rattle and boom of the plant, which never stopped, never shut down.

Wormy G tied his boat up beneath the gaping maw of an old, broken piling that looked like a leviathan's half-extracted tooth. It was too much trouble for the company to tear down, so they left it hanging and rusting for future maintenance specialists to worry about. He took the weighted end of the rope he carried aboard and threw it up and over the lowermost pipe. The weight pulled the rope, which was attached to a nearly massless nypron ladder. After securing it with a quick-release clip, he ascended. Legs straddling the pipe, he flicked the release and pulled the ladder up after him.

Monkeylike, he made his way up through the dense, rusting forest of pipes and conduits until he reached a service walkway. A quick glance revealing that it was unoccupied, he vaulted the railing and hurried along homeward.

His shelter was constructed of plastic panels epoxied to the circular interior of an old transfer pipe. It was tall enough to stand up in, and the opening could be closed by a hinged section of pipe he'd cut out with a borrowed torch long ago. No passerby would suspect that someone was living within.

After latching the doorway, he turned on the air cooler. Out in the Gulf this time of year, there was no need for heat at night, only cooling. As always, it was humid and sticky. Tomorrow he could look forward to another day of temperatures approaching forty degrees and humidity up

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around ninety.

The cooler struggled manfully. Eventually he slept.

HE SPENT the morning working on the bioprobe he'd invested six months in rebuilding. When his eyes began to hurt, he decided to go for a visit, carefully avoiding maintenance and tech crews until he reached the big, globular float that hung suspended from a single cable over a patch of dark, roiling water. Three times he rapped softly on its eggshell-white flank, paused, then repeated the pattern.

The unsuspected opening in the old float's side opened, and he was greeted by a wary Taichi-me. He had his glasses on as usual, Wormy noted disapprovingly.

"You got to cut down on the vits," he told his friend as he climbed inside the converted float. "I keep telling you, you spend too much time sucking that slop. Your brain's gonna turn to tapioca."

Taichi-me wore a sheepish look as he removed the Muse lenses. He owned at least a dozen pairs, all tuned slightly differently, including a powerful Keemsang arc unit that Wormy had reluctantly helped him to restore. It could pick up direct Sat broadcasts instead of just the local air pollution.

Next to his friend, Wormy G loomed large. Taichi-me was a skinny, bony half-Korean, half-Mex kid who kept himself in vit wafers and food by selling ashore what he could fish from the waters beneath his float home. Not seafood, but industrial salvage that drifted down with the current from the plants farther north. Sometimes he even came up with stuff that had made it all the way out the mouth of the Colorado. It wasn't much, but Taichi-me didn't need much. He hardly ever even went ashore anymore, preferring to lie snug and secure in his float, mezed by his glasses, bungoed out on vits.

He was also the nearest thing Wormy G had to a best friend.

"So how'd it go, G?" Taichi-me never called his friend Wormy. "Did you get to see her? Did you get to talk to her." His eyes got wide. "Did you get to *touch* her?"

"Fair. Yes. No. Are you kidding? I just tagged along the way I always do." He lowered his voice to a conspiratorial whisper. "She *did* look at me once, and I know that she saw me, and she didn't say anything to that stupid neg Paco."

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"Hey, that's great, that's plus, that's *muy* solid!" Delighted, Taichi-me leaned back on some of the moldy pillows that lined the interior of the float.

"Better than getting beat up." Wormy grinned.

Taichi-me turned to rummage through a pile of smelly equipment, produced a box of five-centimeter-square LCD screens.

"Look what I netted this morning. What do you think, G?"

Wormy took the plastic container and broke the seal. Most of the screens inside had sustained some water damage, but those in the center of the pack had been protected by the ones on the outside and might still be capable of accepting a charge. He told Taichi-me as much.

"I thought they might be worth a couple of bucks." The skinny kid sounded hopeful. "Are they color?"

"Let's see."

Wormy moved to Taichi-me's box and plugged one of the salvaged screens into an unused vit port. It flickered but lit. The resultant picture was serviceable but not good. The second one was better. The rest were useless.

He had to explain it all because, as an infant, Taichi-me had lost his sight in an accident, and the cheapjack job his long-since-gone parents had bought into provided for the cheapest of replacements. So Taichi-me's thirdhand prosthetic lenses permitted him to see the world only in black and white. He retained a few pitiful early-childhood remembrances of color, which were fading rapidly with age.

Wormy agreed to take the two usable screens into town and sell them at Moritake's. Since they were color, they might get as much as three dollars for the clean one, a buck for the slightly damaged. Come evening he bid his friend good-bye, then boated back to shore to conceal his deflated craft and hunt up the Teslas.

He had a new song for Anita, but first he played back his favorite wafer for his own enjoyment. He always did that before broadcasting to her. It was his little secret. Theirs revolved around the songs he composed and transmitted only to her. She was the only one who could hear them because he aimed his directional transmitter only at her glasses. He knew she received them because, when each had ended, she would turn to glance back at him. Occcasionally she even smiled.

He lived for those smiles, for the sight of her backturned face with its

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reflective eyeshadow highlighting her beautiful green eyes and the thermosensitive lipstick whose color intensified with the minutest rise in her body temperature. Wonderful were those special moments, as if the two of them were playing a private joke on the rest of the gang, on the whole world.

Because only Anita could hear his songs. The little device he had built, had cobbled together out of bits and parts and scavenged knowledge and the skills inherent in his small, delicate fingers, was that precise. She could be leaning right up against that crazy Paco, and he wouldn't hear a thing. Only his Anita.

He eased it out of his shirt and aimed it, using the little add-on telescopic unit to line it up, and then he transmitted. He saw her twitch once, glance back in his direction, then look away. Her glasses rode her face. She was hearing the wafer, he knew. Hearing the song he'd composed only for her.

He never knew if she liked them, but she must have liked something about them because she didn't complain, didn't send Paco or any of the other ninlocos back to smash the sender. He always trembled slightly when he was transmitting for fear she might do just that someday, or that he might otherwise accidentally offend her. But what was there to offend? He was careful not to reach too far, too high in his lyrics, not to make demands or even requests. In the songs he sent, he did not exist. Only her. They extolled her beauty, that was all. Her grace and her light. What girl could find such compliments displeasing, irrespective of their source?

He followed at a respectful distance as the gang ducked under a particularly insistent clot of ambient advert neon. Tendrils of light reached for them, clutching at their hearts and their pockets. They ignored it and strode through, the advert colors illuminating their slick shirts and brazenly colored shorts and boots, reflecting metallically from the receiver suspenders the guys wore.

Suddenly they halted, as if on command. Wormy frowned. Unified responses were alien to the gang. Surely they weren't reacting to an ad. He approached closer than usual, trying to see what had so caught their attention.

Then chaos took over; he found himself swept up in the middle of it.

Sangres. A dozen or so of them, out for a night's mischief stroll, looking to cause some midnight miseria. There was no time for talk, for discussion,

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for reason. Clever homemade weapons magically appeared on both sides, the knives, the delicate little vibratos the girls carried in their culottes, the blue-and-purple titanium-niobium jewelry honed to razor sharpness for double duty.

Wormy found himself caught, swept up in the *terremoto*, unable to break clear. He hunted desperately for a way through, simultaneously trying to protect himself and his precious, irreplaceable transmitter, his one link to his beloved Anita. Spotting a garbage bin, he managed to slip the transmitter under the garbage bin's support rack, where it would be out of harm's way.

Someone must have smashed him from behind, or maybe he was tripped and he just hit the pavement wrong. In any case, he went down hard and out.

When the sleep went away, strange faces hovered like orbiting satellites above his own, haloed by bright lights. But they were no angels. They wore blue cool caps with integral snap-down, light-amplifying night-shades, short-sleeved blue shirts, and tropical blue slacks over running shoes. Federales.

One of them held something in a Teflon glove. Half of it was clotted with something like stale honey. The pointed half.

"Why'd you do it, kid. Won't you crazies ever learn?"

"Do what?" Wormy mumbled dazedly. He sat up slowly, gaping dumbly at the knife.

There were a couple of speedbikes and a cruiser nearby, and lights. Lots of lights, which did nothing to illumine the intimidating mutter of adults talking in low tones. The Teslas were gone. So were the Sangres, except one. He lay on his back, one leg crossed comically across the other, arms splayed on the pavement. Fleshy archipelagoes in a sea of his own blood.

"Come on, *niño*, let's go." Strong hands under his shoulders, lifting him up. As consciousness returned, he began to make connections.

"Hey, that's not my knife," he told them anxiously. "I don' even own a knife, omber. I didn't kill nobody. You the ones who are crazy."

Another fed showed him a micropolaroid. "Prints on knife. Your prints. Knife in your hand. Sorry *niño*. We got a match. You got shit."

Wormy was waking up real fast since someone had started running his guts through a garbage disposal. "Hey, that's crazy, omber! That don' make

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no sense."

"I didn't think you ninlocos liked to make sense," the tech replied. "I thought you liked to make crazy."

"No, hey, no." He began to kick, to howl, but he had about as much chance of breaking free of the big fed as he did of winning the Sinaloa lottery.

They threw him in the back of a cruiser and let him scream all he wanted to in the soundproofed compartment, let him pound on the opaqued glass and dig at the nyproy upholstery. By the time they reached the station, he was exhausted from fighting, unable to cry.

He let them lead him through the bureaucratic maze, refusing to respond to questions, ignoring the faces that poked into his own with varying degrees of concern, hostility, boredom. Let them book him for murder. Allowed them to put him in a holding cell, where he ignored the cheers and jeers of fellow juvie inmates. The other occupants of his cell ignored it all in favor of continued sleep. It was late. One rolled over, squinted indifferently in his direction, coiled back to sleep.

Wormy stumbled into the farthest corner and stood there, staring at the smooth, antiseptic polystyrene wall. He was still numb, he was not cataleptic. His brain continued to work.

Some Tesla had gutted the Sangre. Then they had unconscioused Wormy and planted the bloody knife in his hand for the federales to find. That much was simple, obvious enough. Of course, there was no hope of the federales believing such a story. It was a tale any ninloco would tell to try to save his skin. No one would listen to a dumb street kid's excuses. They had his prints on the knife; that was all they needed. There were no witnesses to the killing except the members of both gangs, and why should they say anything to save him? He wasn't even a gang member. Just a goofy citizen unlucky enough to be in the wrong place at the *equivocado* time.

They would send him to Hermosillo, to the juvie farm there. With luck he might get out in four years. If the other inmates didn't make tacostuff out of him first. Wormy knew he'd have nothing going for him in facility, nothing to offer except his body, which wasn't particularly attractive. It wouldn't matter. They would chew him up and spit him out, and nobody would give a shit, nobody at all.

Paco. It helped to think about the sneering, good-looking neg. Maybe

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Paco had put the knife in his hand. Paco would do something like that. Maybe he was even the killer. Wormy felt better. It helped to have something to hate (he discovered he could hate Paco now). Something to focus his tormented thoughts on. He concentrated on Anita's neg; on his grinning, handsome, ugly face; on his arm, which was always around *dulce* Anita. The muscular, powerful, tattooed arm that Wormy often envisioned feeding to the hammerheads that haunted the pilings beneath the desal plant.

A bored voice approaching. "Danny Mendez; let's go." Wormy turned. A tired guard stood outside the grille. Probably just getting off shift; indifferent to his surroundings, thinking of home. "C'mon, *niño*, get your lazy ass in gear."

Wormy's eyes flicked to the occupied bunk bed. Its occupants slept soundly. Instinctively, he moved forward. It was dark; the guard was into himself. This probably wouldn't go any farther than the gate, he knew, but he had nothing to lose by finding out. Maybe a kick or a fist in the groin when he was discovered, but he could deal with that. It lay in the future.

The guard hardly glanced at him. "Got your street clothes on; good." He pivoted.

Wormy followed, hardly daring to breathe. Was there a chance? Everything had happened real fast. Time enough for confusion to linger. This wasn't an adult prison, wasn't maximum-security *nada*.

The guard led him through the gate, into the jail's outer offices. Danny Mendez, Wormy told himself. The name blazed itself into his brain. I am Danny Mendez, and I need, want, deserve to get the hell out of here.

He tried to keep his head down without being obvious about it. The checkout clerk was equally busy, didn't bother to look up from her box screen. She assumed that the guard knew what he was doing. The guard assumed likewise of the clerk.

They had him sign for the personal effects of the innocent Mendez. Wormy accepted them without protest. A little money, a credcard he could jerk around, a cheap Indonesian watch. A packet of thermosensitive condoms, a half-pack of sense sticks. He pocketed it all.

The guard led him to the door of the jail out back, mumbled something about staying out of trouble, and nudged him out into the night.

Wormy stood there a moment, staring at the damp, humid back street. Then he started walking. Not too fast. Probably they wouldn't discover

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the mistake until Mendez awoke or somebody expecting him on the outside starting making inquiries.

Only after he hit the alleys did he start running. He ran until his heart threatened to burst through his sallow chest, ran until he had to stop because the pain in his throat was choking him. Then he cautiously began to retrace his steps, until he was back at the scene of the fight.

The feds were gone, along with the corpse of the unfortunate Sangre. The transmitter was where he had secreted it, untouched and unharmed. He slipped it back into the front pocket of his shorts and headed for the beach.

Taichi-me found him in his pipe, working under a battery-powered light. "Hey G, I ain't seen you in days, omber? What you doin'?"

Wormy said nothing, did not look up. He didn't have the right equipment, didn't have decent parts, and it was hard doing what he was tring to do. But he'd thought about it a lot. It was possible. He could do it. Paco was his inspiration. Taichi-me moved close to peer over his friend's shoulder.

"That's your girl toy, ain't it?"

"Shut up," Wormy muttered.

The younger man backed off. "Take it easy. Didn't mean nothing." He looked hurt. Wormy sighed.

"It's O.K. I'm just having a hard time." He turned back to the improvised workbench. "I'm going looking for somebody. Not Anita."

"Sure." Taichi-me shrugged. "You let me know if I can help, O.K.?"

"You can't. Not with this. I just need time."

Sure, omber. I'll wait. Vit you later."

"Yeah, right."

He knew the feds would find him eventually if he stayed in Penasco. After they realized their mistake, they'd start broadcasting the holos they'd taken of him. Sooner or later somebody would recognize one and call him in. Except for Taichi-me, he knew he couldn't rely on the discretion of the desal plants' inhabitants. Not where real reward money was involved. He had to find out what he needed to know before that happened, had to finish some things while he still had time.

It took him plenty days and still he wasn't sure it would work. But he didn't see how he could make it better. He went looking for the Teslas.

He didn't find them, and when he went later that night to talk it over

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Wormy started to retreat, fumbling for his transmitter as he did so.

with Taichi-me, his friend was gone. Where the big float that the kid had converted into a home had hung, there was only a frayed cable, dangling in the humidity like a severed nerve. Flying fish darted through the Promethean pilings below while the moon hinted at the ghostly presence of mantas.

"Taichi-me! Goddamn it!" He wrung his hands. Had they pried him out first or just cut him free, not realizing that there might be a living, breathing human being inside? Had the float been salvaged or just dumped?

"He's O.K., *niño*." Wormy whirled. Two big desal guards stood on the catwalk behind him, blocking his escape. "We got him out first. Trespass is a misdemeanor. He'll be out in a few months."

"Had to scrag his junk, though." The other one made a sniggering noise. "Should have seen him cry over that crap."

Wormy knew that that crap consisted of all Taichi-me's earthly possessions, everything he'd been able to scavenge or buy with his pitiful earnings over the past three years. Junk. That's how they think of us, he thought. We're just junk, barnacles to be scraped off the pilings and fed to the bottom dwellers. Garbage.

One of the men started toward him. "Come on, now, *niño*. Don't make no trouble for us, we won't make no trouble for you."

Wormy started to retreat, fumbling for his transmitter as he did so. "Go play in the ooze, *pendejos*."

The man's expression darkened. "Don't get smart with me, sperm trash." He glanced meaningfully at the calm, receptive water below. "You could have an accident."

"So could you," Wormy stammered with false bravado as he desperately aimed the transmitter.

The man stopped as if he'd run headlong into a ten-ton block of ice. Then he screamed and grabbed his ears. His partner looked on in shock. Wormy turned and ran, sliding down a pipe to the next catwalk below, jumping a three-meter gap to dig his way into a maze of piping and tubing. Security did not pursue. His last sight of the man on the catwalk showed

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him kicking and moaning as his dazed companion bent over him. After a while he looked over the side of the catwalk, but by then Wormy was away and gone.

His greatest fear was that they would send a boat out after him. His little inflatable's radar silhouette was slight enough to be overlooked, but they might trap him with a spotlight scan.

While almost silent, his craft's tiny motor was not very powerful. Knowing that they could catch him easily, he was a writhing knot of anxiety until he finally beached the inflatable beneath the massive codos that lined the shore. Without thinking, he went through the motions of deflating and hiding it, wondering as he did so if he'd ever be able to make use of it again.

He'd hurt a guard, maybe badly. The modification of his transmitter had been driven by a theoretical notion of its potential. Now he had some idea of what it could do. So would the feds once his unfortunate victim was examined. He was no longer just a juvie parasite on the desal plant's backside. He was a genuine threat. They'd leaven the search for him with some real intensity.

Hugging the transmitter like an injured baby, he hurried off into the city.

None of the locals knew Cardenas personally, but he didn't have to introduce himself. His reputation preceded him. Besides, any federale who survived into his fifties automatically acquired the respect of his colleagues.

Cardenas wandered into the room, his blue eyes searching. His big black drooping mustache saddled him with a perpetually hangdog expression. Not that melancholy wasn't present in his personality, but it was a consequence of his job, not his appearance. He considered the doctor, the local lieutenant, and the man lying in the hospital bed.

They had asked him to come down from Nogales because they had run into something they weren't familiar with and couldn't explain. Whenever this happened, people usually found their way to Cardenas. It was a responsibility he accepted with resigned grace. After so many years on the force, he had long since grown used to the attention; the sideways glances, the whispering behind his back.

At least his unglamorous appearance (he did not look good on the vits no matter how they photographed him) allowed him to maintain a low

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profile. This pleased him. It was his experience that federales with high media exposure had a tendency to have their careers violently cut short by excitable ninlocos or runners in search of revenge, reputation, or both.

After thirty years of working the Strip, he'd seen a lot, but nothing quite like the report on this little coastal contretemps.

He gazed down at the guard. The man was twice his size, massive and muscular. He looked competent, though. Then he spoke to the lieutenant. "Some kid did this?"

The officer nodded. "That's what the comedown says. They were excising squatters from the Desal Tres out in the Gulf; the pipes out there are home to antisocs and weirds of every kind. This guy and his partner were in the process of netting another one, when suddenly the ninloco points some piece of box junk at him, and his head goes berserk."

"I read the report." Cardenas looked back at the man in the bed. "Music, wasn't it?"

The lieutenant nodded. "Nothing remarkable about that. According to our man here, what he could make of it sounded like your usual babbling contemp trash. It wasn't the music per se that was responsible for the injury, though. It was the way it was broadcast. Or maybe received. It was more than just directional. His *compadre* never heard a thing. The lab's been working on possibilities, but they're still baffled. Presumably the ninloco knows how he did it, but he got away."

"And now he's out in the city somewhere, and everybody's nervous he might decide to play with his toy again."

"*Exactamente,* sergeant." The officer looked down at his stocky colleague. "The other guard got a good look at him. We've got a POV holo out. Interestingly, it coordinated with that of a ninloco booked earlier for murder who was released by mistake from Eastside station."

Cardenas peered up at the lieutenant, blue eyes gleaming. "By mistake?"

The officer made a face. "Bureaucratic foul-up. They were supposed to release somebody else from the same cell. It was late; this ninloco had just been booked in; nobody did their job."

Cardenas shook his head. "And he was in for murder?"

"Sand fight, just a miseria; nobody knows. Found him unconscious with the murder weapon in his hand. Said he didn't do it, of course."

"Of course." Cardenas returned his attention to the man in the bed. "Anything else?"

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The lieutenant sighed. "Damn little. Kid gave his name as Wormy G, wouldn't tell us his real name . . . if he has one. No ID number. No card, no bracelet. Typical ninloco outer. Didn't look like much. Skinny little twerp."

"Dangerous skinny little twerp," Cardenas added. "Anybody check out his claim that he didn't kill anybody?"

"Can't do much without the prime subject to question."

"Questions make these kids nervous."

The lieutenant grunted. "If you want to see it, I've got the file in my box."

Cardenas patted his shirt pocket where the police portable rested. "Already transferred. I'll call you if I need you."

"Don't you want backup, a cruiser?" the lieutenant asked him.

Cardenas shook his head. "Not right away. I know Penasco pretty good. Been here a few times on other business. Be easier trying to find one kid melted into the wallwork if I can melt in a little myself."

"Suit yourself." The lieutenant watched the sergeant depart. He was glad when he was gone. He didn't much like Intuits, not even department types. They made him uneasy. Knowing how hard it was to lie to one kind of crimped normal conversation.

He wanted to ask the security guard some more questions, but couldn't until they were printed up. Because the man in the bed was now stone-cold deaf.

Wormy kept to the back alleys and the service ways, away from the lights. He spent the next day in a big recycle dumpster, not daring to return to the desal platform. Probably his little cozy had been discovered and vacuumed by now, its hard-won contents dumped into the Gulf alongside poor Taichi-me's possessions.

They might as well go ahead and dump him, too, Wormy thought bitterly. The kid was too vit bungoed to last a month in juvie hold. He'd go over the screen inside, never come out intact. He had been the nearest thing to a real friend Wormy had had, and now he was gone, too.

There wasn't much left to try to scavenge except maybe a little truth.

He found two of them, Carasco and Gray Leena, outside Compieradas' Emporium. They were leaning against the wall, sharing a sense stick and laughing and giggling. Wormy sidled out of the shadows, nervously watching the street for signs of federales.

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"Hey, Carasco?"

The big Tesla turned, frowning. "Who asks?"

"Me. You know me, Carasco." Wormy stepped farther into the streetlight.

"Hey, ain't you the little freak who keeps following Anita around? Paco finds you, he's gonna grease you good, *camarón*."

"Wait a minute, Cary." Drogged by the sense stick, Gray Leena was trying to focus on the new arrival. "How come he ain't in jail?"

"Yeahhh." Carasco seemed to remember something. "How come you ain't in jail?"

"They let me go." Wormy looked past them, eyes on the street. "I got to find Anita."

Carasco laughed. He was a big kid, full of wildness and the usual juvie sense of misplaced immortality. Nothing could hurt him; nothing could frighten him.

"Get gone. Waft. *Jojobar, camarón.*"

"I got to know. I got to ask her something." As Carasco started to turn away, Wormy made a desperate grab for his shirt.

Carasco reached around to swat him with the back of his hand, disdaining the effort required to form his fingers into a fist. Wormy went staggering back, stung. The bigger boy's expression went mean.

"You touch me again, *camarón*, and there won't be nothing left for Paco to grind."

Wormy's lips tightened. He extracted his transmitter. "Tell me where she is. Tell me now."

Carasco squinted at the device. "Or what? You gonna grease me with your box?" He took a step forward, reaching out with a massive hand. "About time somebody got rid of that piece of junk."

Wormy retreated, holding the transmitter in front of his chest like a shield. "Don't, Carasco. I don' want to hurt you."

The big Tesla laughed and continued to advance.

Wormy touched a contact. Carasco suddenly whipped around almost in midair, as if he'd been hit by a heavy-caliber slug, to land screaming on his back holding the sides of his head. Beyond, a couple of patrons about to enter the Emporium had stopped and were staring in the direction of the noise.

"Jesus!" Gray Leena bent over her neg, who was kicking and crying like

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an infant. She stared fearfully up at Wormy G. "What'd you do to him?"

"He was gonna hurt me. Where's Anita?"

"Try the Tiburon pier. She said somethin' about spendin' the *noche* out there with Paco." She touched her whimpering boyfriend, drew her fingers back as though his skin had suddenly acquired toxic properties. "What did you *do* to him?"

Wormy spun and ran into the night, leaving behind the lights of the Emporium, the street sounds, and the whine of an approaching siren.

Tiburon pier extended triple fingers out across a shallow portion of the Gulf. It was a mixing place, old and seedy but full of life and lights, a grand spot to stroll away a hot summer night. Rich administrators and cleanies, assemblers and maskers mixed freely on the pier with ninlocos on good behavior, poor truck farmers from inland, recycle monkeys and space-basers. On the pier, nobody cared who or what you were. Darkness and damp dissolved away daytime discrimination. All that mattered was the soothing sound of the Golfo Californio slapping against the pilings beneath your feet, the noise and laughter and smell of greasy seafood frying in dozens of tiny shops.

Wormy was glad of the crowd. While the pier had its own private security force, patrolling federales occasionally put in an appearance.

It was busy tonight, active as it always was in the summer season. Plenty of *touristas* as well as locals out trying to beat some of the heat. Good pickings if one were inclined to a little petit larceny. But not this evening. Not for him.

He found them almost by accident, as he was about to give up and start back from the tip of the southern finger. They were standing to the left of the fishermen who methodically cast their lines over the sides of the pier more for the activity than in hopes of catching anything. Farther out on the dark sea lay the ambulatory stars that marked the location of cruising ships, pleasure craft, and shrimpers orbiting the brighter constellations of the desal plants.

Paco and Anita's embrace rendered them oblivious to such sights. Their faces were pushed tightly against each other, lips and tongues pressing, probing. Paco had his hand on the back of her glazed culottes, and she had both arms around him.

As always, the sight was almost too painful for Wormy to bear. Another time, another night, he would have fled in despair. Tonight he

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could not.

He stepped out of the dark place where he'd been hiding, his voice tremulous. "Anita?"

They separated, startled. Up the pier the fishermen, intent on their lines and conversation, ignored the confrontation. Paco seethed.

"What do you mean scaring us like that, you stinking little shit?" He straightened slightly, remembering. "How'd you get out of jail?"

"Luck and accident." Wormy was watching Anita, not her threatening neg. "I got to know what happened."

Paco smirked at him. "You killed a Sangre. Congratulations, *camarón*. Now waft before I call the feds."

"I didn't kill nobody. You know that." He was speaking to Anita, who regarded him the way she would something that had just spilled dead and slimy from a fisherman's pail.

"The feds think you did," said Paco. "That's good enough."

For the first time since he'd found them, Wormy locked eyes with his tormentor. "Then you know I didn't do it. You know I don't carry a knife. Who did it, Paco? Carasco? Ellioto? Sad Jerry?"

The big ninloco grinned at him. "Maybe me?"

"And you put the knife in my hand so the federales would find it."

Paco just laughed and shook his head. "You poor *camarón*. Why don't you just waft now? Maybe the feds don' find you if you can make your way as far as Hermosillo." He took a step forward. "Go on, creep, waft!"

Wormy raised the transmitter.

"Don't come near me, Paco."

"I think that's about enough."

The three of them turned in the direction of the new voice. The short man with the mustache who was standing nearby was overdressed for Penasco's climate, sweating in his long shirt and sandals and slacks. He looked sad and unhappy, like somebody's grandfather escaped from a pension home. Older than his years.

Wormy retreated and pointed the transmitter in his direction, trying to keep an eye on Paco at the same time. "You a fed?"

"*Sí*. And you are not a murderer."

Uncertain, Wormy lowered the transmitter a little. "How you know that, mister?"

The man stared back at him, his transplanted blue eyes unblinking.

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His gaze was almost hypnotic and it held Wormy still. He searched the shadows behind the man, but there was no sign of other federales. It made no sense.

Then he understood. "You're an Intuit, aren't you?"

The man gestured diffidently. "I have been doing my job. Listening to what all of you have been saying, to the nuances and shadings of your voices. I know you did not kill that other boy." His voice tightened slightly. "You did hurt that man on the desal rig, though, didn't you? And the boy back in the city."

"What are you talking about, omber?" Paco inquired, lost in the conversation, unhappy at being ignored.

"I didn't mean to," Wormy mumbled. "I didn't mean to hurt nobody. But they were gonna put me off the platform, and I had to do something, you *comprende*! I had to do something."

"It's going to be O.K. now. I promise you. I'll speak up for you in court. Besides, I know who killed that other boy." The blue eyes regarded Paco sadly.

"Hey, fed: you crazy, omber. I don't kill nobody. You can' prove nothin'. I don't care if you are a weird. I heard about you guys. You hear things in other people's voices, see things in their faces. That's *toro mierde*, omber." He was backing toward the railing that edged the pier.

"You put the knife in my hand," Wormy said accusingly. "You did it, Paco. You!" He raised the transmitter.

Cardenas judged the distance. He was much faster than he looked, but the boy was still far enough away to swing the device around and bring it to bear on him. Having lived six years in the kingdom of the blind, he was genuinely afraid of possible deafness. The biosurges had given him back his sight. He had no desire to go through that again at the expense of a different sense.

"You nasty little *camarón* shit! Leave him alone!" Anita stepped in front of her boyfriend. "*I* put the damn knife in your stinking stupid little hand, who do you think?" She sneered down at him. "Always following me around, like a little dog. I got tired of trying to shoo you away. Then that happened, and I saw a chance to get rid of you and help somebody I loved besides. What did you think I would do?"

The younger boy stared uncomprehendingly at her. "You put . . . ? But what about our secret? I thought you . . . ?"

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She laughed sharply. "What, those stupid little songs you kept sending through my glasses? You can't even sing. I always told Paco about them afterward. We had some good laughs."

The kid's voice was as dry as the Sierra San Pedro Martir, a sick, unhealthy rasp. "You told him? You told *him* my songs, our songs?"

"Shit, what you think, *camarón*? Why you think I didn't have him take that toy away from you and throw it into the Golfo the first time you pull that. Because you kept me laughing. Because you were so funny. But not so funny that I didn't think you'd look better with the knife in your fingers when the federales congealed."

"Oh." Wormy stood there, swaying a little, as if keeping time to an unheard tune. Then he touched a contact on the top of the crazy, cobbled-together mass of components and wires and wafers he carried, and raised it. Too ignorant to know better, the girl just stood there, as if her sheer beauty were shield enough. Her boyfriend shrank down behind her, trying to conceal himself, trying to hide.

Cardenas moved, but he was too late. The boy's thumb convulsed on a second contact.

As he reversed the transmitter and pointed it directly at his own skull.

It was as if a giant fist had struck him under the chin. His small body arched up and back, and he did a broken half-somersault, striking the ground hard, writhing and twitching like a worm on the end of a hook. Blood exploded from the sides of his head.

Cardenas kicked the transmitter out of the boy's fingers. As it went skittering across the plastic pavement, the twin LEDs on its surface winked out. The febrile, feathery wiring at one end snapped, a couple of sparks flared, and a crack appeared on the side of the case.

Breathing hard, Cardenas looked down at the skinny kid, whose twitching was already beginning to slow. He spoke without glancing up. "Don't move, please. You are both under arrest."

Paco bolted toward the bright lights of the middle pier. Cardenas pressed a switch on the police box in his pocket. The ninloco would not make it back to land.

The girl had better sense. She stood there, angry and upset, not glancing in the direction of the younger boy at all.

The parameds got there fast, but not fast enough.

"He's gone." The middle-aged woman looked up from the pathetic

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corpse. It was no longer bleeding from the ears. "I mean, his body's still alive, but that's all." She tapped the side of her head meaningfully. "He blew in his ears. There's pulverized bone all mixed in with the blood. I did a quickscan. The cochlea is gone on both sides, along with the ossicles, the utricle and saccule and some of the surrounding supporting bone. The force of it drove bone fragments into the brain and caused immediate hemorrhaging. He's a vegetable."

When the lieutenant arrived, a tech was gingerly examining the transmitter, poking and prodding the damaged device. Finally he picked it up and walked over to his superiors. There was plenty of disbelief in his voice as he spoke to Cardenas.

"That kid made this?"

"So we believe," said the sergeant.

"You know how Muse glasses work? You watch the vit images in the lenses while the arms deliver the accompanying audio to the eardrum by direct transduction. The power is kept way down so that nobody can overhear and you don't disturb others when you use the glasses in a public place." He tapped the transmitter.

"This son of a bitch is a tunable broadcast transducer. It works just like glasses, except no physical contact is necessary. It's also overpowered by a factor of a hundred or so. No wonder he blew his brains. His ears must have imploded. I don't know how the hell he worked out the necessary logs or frequencies, but me and the guys back at the lab are sure as hell gonna find out. He made it out of junk, too. Scrap I wouldn't give twenty bucks for." The tech looked down at the body.

"Poor scared little *niño* was a freakin' genius. Hey, I've rigged it with a speaker wafer. Want to hear what he killed himself with?"

Cardenas said nothing, but the lieutenant nodded. The tech held up a DiData control nodule he'd attached to the damaged transmitter by an optical pass cord.

A voice emerged from the tiny wafer grid that had been hastily glued to the top of the transmitter. It was cracked and disjointed, but audible. Someone had set it to crude synthesized music.

"I love you so much, baby . . . oh, do that to me, please . . . I can't hold you tight enough . . . squeeze me harder, lover . . . melt into me. . . ."

A shriek made them turn. Two Blues were loading the girl into a waiting cruiser, when she whirled to stare furiously at them.

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"The little shit! The dirty little *camarón!* That's me! That's my voice. He stole my voice! Alla time he was following me, he was stealing my voice."

They shoved her into the cruiser, shutting off her hysterical tirade. The tech regarded both men.

"His pockets were full of stuff. Among other things, he had a compact directional mike on him. He must've eavesdropped on her conversations with her boyfriend and edited him out, cut out the parts he didn't like, added music, and made himself his own little private fantasy chip. Something he could listen to real intimate like, via Muse transduction when nobody else was around. Like she was saying all those sweet things to him. His own little secret. Pretty sick, huh? The kid was pretty sick."

Cardenas looked past him to the bloodstained pavement. The parameds had already removed the crumpled rag of a body. It would not go on life support. There was no reason, no anxious relatives. No money.

"No," he muttered. "He wasn't sick."

The tech spoke up. "How would you . . . ?"

"Sergeant Cardenas is an Intuit," the lieutenant explained quietly, interrupting.

"Ah. Right." The tech gave Cardenas that familiar look, the one that always slipped out before people realized what they were doing, and left, carrying the broken transmitter like a cache of precious jewels.

When he was gone, the lieutenant turned to the older officer. "You that sure he wasn't sick, Sergeant?"

"No, but it wouldn't have mattered. He died before he turned his handiwork on himself." Hard blue eyes gazed past the blood, to the dark, indifferent sea. "Over the years I've come to believe that emotions can be conveyed all kinds of ways. Call it verbal transduction if you want. The techs, they always have to have names for things." He inhaled deeply of the bracing salt air.

"The kid . . . his soul imploded before his ears did."

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SCIENCE

ISAAC ASIMOV

OF HUMAN FOLLY

I WAS ONCE interviewed on the radio, and the interviewer seemed fascinated by my skepticism. He kept asking if I believed in this and if I believed in that, and I answered, "No," every time.

Finally, he decided he would get down to the nitty-gritty. He said, "Do you mean to say," and his voice grew sepulchral, "that you don't believe in the — Devil?"

I jumped a little. "The Devil," I said. "I never met anyone who believed in the Devil or who gave him two thoughts. Why don't you ask me," and my voice grew sepulchral in imitation of his, "if I believe in — God!"

But he wouldn't ask any such thing. He changed the subject. Clearly, he was afraid that if he asked me that, I would answer, "No, I don't" (which is certainly what I would have said), and he feared the reaction of his audience.

I didn't fear it, but that lily-livered coward did.

I once gave a talk to four thousand people in Richmond, Virginia, and a very good talk it was. I spoke of the manner in which we were destroying our environment, and I was very emotional about it, too.

So there came the question-and-answer period, and a man stood up and said, "Professor Asimov, why are you so worried about destroying the environment, when Jesus Christ will be returning in the Second Coming before long."

(I stared at him in disbelief. Presumably, I felt, he had decided that if Jesus came back and found a single patch of the environment unpolluted, a single bit clean and decent, he would be very annoyed with us.)

I answered quietly, "Why on Earth should I believe any such foolthing as the Second Coming when I have the good luck not to be a Christian."

There was an instant intake of

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several thousand breaths as everyone stared at someone who had the audacity to say — in public, yet — that he was not a Christian, and who acted happy about it. I am sure that quite a few people expected a lightning bolt to come down and smear me all over the place, but, of course, that didn't happen.

I grinned happily, answered other questions, finished, collected my check, and went back to my hotel.

People believe in the existence of ghosts, of zombies, of leprechauns who watch over pots of gold, and banshees who wail at a forthcoming death, of-werewolves, of vampires.

Why not, in the old days, when very little was known about the world and where all these things might well exist.

Today, however, we live in a world of science and rationality, and there are *still* people who believe in all that nonsense.

Why is that?

For one thing, all these beliefs are dramatic. They are frightening. Tell the stories around a campfire and feel the shivers.

And what have we rationalists to say in response?

All we can do is deny. There are no such things as ghosts, zombies, leprechauns, banshees, werewolves or vampires.

What we're doing is presenting you with a dull world that you don't want to accept.

Then, too, most people grow annoyed with these all-knowing scientists who stick their noses in the air at things you want to exist. If you want your castle haunted by a headless ghost, you don't want some wise guy saying, "Nonsense!"

The result is that you continue to believe things that are absolutely the crudest junk.

For instance, about a hundred years ago, two young women with nothing much to do cut out a couple of figurines that looked like fairies and took photographs of themselves and their fairies. Anyone looking at the photographs with half an eye could tell they were fakes, but that didn't help Sir Arthur Conan Doyle.

Sir Arthur had made himself world-famous as the author of the Sherlock Holmes stories, and Holmes was the very epitome of the rationalist. In real life, however, Sir Arthur believed in spiritualism and a mess of other follies. How is that possible? Don't ask me.

In any case, Sir Arthur saw the pictures of the fairies and fell for them. He went around for a long time insisting that fairies existed, and using those faked photographs as evidence.

Of course, scientists are human, too, and can fall for foolishness,

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especially in their old age. Sir William Crookes, a first-rate British physicist, in his old age grew interested in spiritualism and was easily fooled by mediums. (It is simple to be fooled, if you *want* to be fooled.)

Robert Hare, an American chemist, grew interested in spiritualism late in life and invented a device by which he thought he could communicate with spirits. He wrote a fat volume on the subject in 1854. A German physicist, Wilhelm Eduard Weber, also turned to spiritualism late in life, as did a Russian chemist, Alexander Butlerov.

I had an editor once, John W. Campbell, Jr., whose hobby it was to prove scientists wrong. He would believe anything — anything under the sun — as long as what he believed tended to show that scientists didn't know what they were talking about.

One of the things he used to do was make a collection of all the scientists who accepted spiritualism and use that as a proof that there was something to it.

I would say, "John, why don't you put together a much larger collection of all the scientists who said that spiritualism was phoney and prove there's nothing to it." However, he wouldn't listen to me.

* * *

Of course, there are fads and foolishness that are quite modern. You don't have to go back centuries to pick up material on ghosts and fairies.

What about "unidentified flying objects" (or "flying saucers," as they are often called)? John Campbell was great on flying saucers. He accepted them and hugged them to his bosom. So do millions of people who know nothing about astronomy.

For nearly fifty years, now, people have been talking about flying saucers, and have presented all kinds of silly data supporting them. Right now, for instance, we have lived through a rash of books about people who were kidnapped by aliens in flying saucers and then returned — but for what reason is never explained.

In all that time, though, nothing has *really* developed as a result. It's all fairy tales.

I get so tired of it, you have no idea. After all, I'm a science fiction writer and everyone knows it, and there is always a feeling that a science fiction writer has an "open mind."

They all say to me eagerly, "Do you believe in flying saucers?"

"No," I say, sharply, and they're always so disappointed.

When I hear a scientific advance announced on television, I immedi-

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ately stiffen with disbelief. In the first place, the people making the announcement do not know science and are interested only in saying something sensational.

In fact, any scientist who allows his discovery to be announced on television, instead of in the scientific journals, earns my distrust at once. He is not after scientific truth, but after a Nobel Prize or a lot of money and fame.

About two years ago, we had a marvellous example of this. Two chemists announced the existence of "cold fusion." This meant they could make hydrogen fuse together and produce enormous quantities of energy, and do it at ordinary temperatures.

Cold fusion meant a *cheap* source of virtually eternal energy. It also made physicists, who had been looking for hot fusion for nearly forty years, look foolish.

Very few people knew what cold fusion was or how it worked, but it was enough that it was cheap and made scientists look foolish. Of course, this was emphasized on television and for a while, cold fusion was the hottest thing in the news.

There was only one small catch. It didn't work.

That doesn't stop people from being eager about it. Two years have passed in which absolutely nothing has developed out of cold fusion, and people still come to me with stars in their eyes and say, "What do you think of cold fusion?"

I answer coldly, "It's a mess of nonsense."

And they go off unhappily. That's not what they want to hear.

Even more recently, the television began hopping up and down again. It seems that some scientists had announced the existence of a youth serum, and if there is anything everybody wants (including me, for goodness sake) it's a youth serum.

It was based on human growth hormone and, if smeared on the skin, it removed wrinkles, gave it a youthful shine, and, presumably, made the whole body young.

My dear wife, Janet, was watching my face as this was being announced and she said to me, "Don't you think there's anything to it, Isaac?"

"No," I said, "I don't. Here's what I think will happen. On closer examination, they will find out that: 1) the effect is purely superficial, just smoothing out the skin; 2) it will turn out to be purely temporary, and 3) it will turn out to have unpleasant side-effects. After a little while, this stuff will vanish from the television tube and never be heard of again."

I was completely and entirely

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correct, but I got no medals for being right. The public wanted a youth serum.

Some years ago, a new medical fad arose. The world is full of medical fads, incidentally. Despite the fact that modern medicine works so well, people are always looking for something better. They want "the laying on of hands," they want "psychic surgery." Most of all, they want "prayer." Heaven only knows how many people, who are quite ill, have been prayed over till they were quite dead. It doesn't seem to bother anyone. The dead man just didn't have "enough faith."

Anyway, the fad I am now referring to involved many needles and was called "acupuncture." It was derived from Chinese medical practice, and the idea was that if needles were stuck into the body in appropriate places, it acted as an anesthesia, or it cured arthritis, or who knows what.

People jumped all over it. Personally, I wouldn't want needles stuck into my body for any purpose, but it proved rather popular. For one thing, it was cheap. For another, it made fools of orthodox physicians, and it is always fun to make fools of scientists.

What astonished me is that my very own doctor grew enthusiastic over acupuncture. He had travelled much in China and had become an old Chinese hand, so that he was very impressed by "barefoot doctors" (whatever they are) and by acupuncture.

I asked my doctor if the needles were plunged into the body along the lines of nerves so that they could have some sort of neurogenic effect. He said, "No, it had nothing to do with the nerves."

"How, then," said I, "can it act as an anesthetic and do all the other things it is supposed to do?"

Well, I don't know," said my doctor, "but it seems to work."

"Listen," I said. "You're crazy."

And he was, at that moment, for acupuncture has disappeared because it *didn't* work.

Incidentally, this business of "it seems to work" is probably the strongest support any piece of folly ever receives. Nothing is ever so silly and stupid that there aren't people who insist that they've tried it out and it worked. There's not an anti-cancer nostrum ever invented that didn't obtain unsolicited letters from people who insist they had been cured of cancer by it. After all, anything will work — at least temporarily — if you're sure it will.

I am president of the Dutch Treat Club and, a couple of years ago, someone arranged the head table and omitted me. I wandered round

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and round the table reading the cards and my name simply wasn't there. I didn't really care because the people at the head table were not of great interest to me. Still, I felt that I ought to uphold the honor of the Presidency, so I demanded a seat at the head table.

It served me right. They squeezed me in, to my horror, between Shirley Maclaine and her daugher. Shirley Maclaine is an actress who I admire less than any actress I know. How I squirmed and tried to avoid talking to either one of them.

Shirley Maclaine has this weird notion that involves transmigration of souls. I believe she thinks she was once Cleopatra. (Poor Cleopatra!) If you try to argue with her, her answer is, "This is *my* truth." In other words, she considered truth subjective and that she has the right to believe anything she wants. Since out of his nonsense, she has made a great deal of money, I suppose we can't very well do much in the way of sneering.

This matter of transmigration of souls, however, which many people believe in —

Who doesn't want the thought that after he dies he will be reborn and have a brand-new life.

The catch is: What kind of life will you have? Right now, there are 5,400,000,000 people on Earth, and the vast, vast majority, are starving Sudanese, drowning Bangladeshi, shivering Kurds, impoverished Latin Americans, and so on. The chances are a few million to one that you will be born one of these pitiful creatures and live out a relatively short and miserable life.

My own life has been a marvellously good one. Do you think I want to take a chance on another life that will be a marvellously bad one? Far better to die and greet nothingness.

Of course, there are many people who believe that after they die they will go to Heaven, but it seems to me that almost everyone will admit that, thanks to a kindly all-merciful God, far more people are slated for Hell than for Heaven.

I, myself, since I am an atheist, am surely slated for Hell. Fortunately, since I am absolutely certain that Hell does not exist, I am not trembling at the possibility.

It's amazing how *good* change tends to be rejected.

In the tenth century, the Holy Roman Emperor Otto II had married a Byzantine princess and she brought in some of the more civilized aspects of life from the East.

For instance, she made use of forks.

The good people of Otto's court objected furiously to the sissified

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novelty. They thought one should not toss food into the mouth like hay into a barn. They also went around saying, "Fingers were made before forks."

I suppose you can't blame these boors altogether. They knew nothing about personal hygiene and the germ theory of disease, and they tended to die like flies from infections of all kinds. However, even as late as the 17th Century, Louis XIV of France ate his meals with his fingers.

In the 1700s, in Connecticut, the first umbrella was designed and put to use. I'm amazed that no one thought of it earlier. I'm even more amazed that people who observed its being used were dreadfully annoyed.

It was a case of putting all the blame for ignorance upon God. The argument was that if God wanted you to be wet, he should make you wet, and that it was blasphemous to try to keep the rain off.

Of course, prior to umbrellas, people wore heavy greatcoats with hoods to keep the rain off. That, apparently, was all right, but not an umbrella.

However, God lost that argument, for people enjoyed not getting wet in a rainstorm, and umbrellas became a piece of haberdashery that the Englishman, for instance, is never without.

In the 1750s, Benjamin Franklin invented the lightning rod, which kept lightning from hitting houses and barns. You'd think everyone would be delighted. Not at all. God came into the picture again, and there were ecclesiastics of all kinds who objected strenuously to the use of lightning rods. After all, if God wanted to hit someone or something with lightning, he had the right to do so without interference.

In 1755, an enormous earthquake and tsunami destroyed the city of Lisbon, in Portugal. The ministers in Boston rose in their wrath and said that Lisbon was destroyed because Bostonians were putting up lightning rods. This certainly didn't speak very highly for God's marksmanship.

But, as a matter of fact, God lost out again. Nobody wanted to be hit by lightning if it could be avoided and, eventually, lightning rods went up even on churches.

In the 1840s, anesthesia came into use, and one thing it was used for was to ameliorate the pains of childbirth.

That drove the ministers almost crazy, because God had said to Eve that "in pain and sorrow shalt thou bring forth children," and the ministers were absolutely intent on making sure that all the descendants of Eve so suffered.

But God lost again. Quite apart

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from the fact that women generally didn't want to bring forth children in pain and sorrow, Queen Victoria made use of anesthesia during childbirth. At once the furor died down and the ministers were silent. After all, God was only God, but the Queen was the *Queen*.

I am a member of the Baker Street Irregulars, or, at least, I was. The Baker Street Irregulars idolize Sherlock Holmes. I'm not an idolator of the man myself, but I didn't mind attending the meetings.

There was a catch, however. All the Baker Street Irregulars try to be as much like Sherlock Holmes as possible. Thus, they virtually all wore deer-stalker hats. Well, there's nothing much wrong with that. I have a deer-stalker, too, and I have worn it on occasion.

However, Sherlock Holmes was a fiendish smoker of harsh and smelly tobacco, and all the Baker Street Irregulars, after the annual banquet, would light up their foul tobacco and puff away.

It drove me crazy. I objected strenuously, but it did no good. I said to them, "Sherlock Holmes also made use of cocaine. How many here are also making use of that."

That didn't bother them. They continued to smoke. It is not that I can't stand the smell (which I can't) and that it clings to my clothes (which it does) but that I am forced to inhale the noxious fumes myself. I become a "passive smoker" and my life is thereby shortened. Why on Earth should I be willing to shorten my life in order that someone else should get the pleasure out of smoking.

So I no longer attend the meetings of the Baker Street Irregulars.

I had a similar problem with the Mystery Writers of America. I had been appointed one of the members of the board, and so I attended a board meeting. I found that everyone at the meeting smoked.

I never attended another board meeting.

Many people have lucky objects to fend off disasters. We all know about rabbits' feet, about lucky coins, and so on. Without them, terrible things will happen to you.

We're all brought up to believe in things like that. (If your parents don't teach you, the other kids will.) When I was a kid, I was painstakingly taught that in order to ward off the evil eye, I must be careful to spit three times.

There were things of terrible ill-omen. I believe that when a shroud was sewed for a dead body, the needle used to do the sewing was filled with omens of death. It could not be kept in the house and so it was thrown away in the street.

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One day, coming home from school, I came across a needle lying in the street. I happened to know that if you saw a pin and picked it up then all the day you'd have good luck. Picking up a needle seemed to me to be even more effective. So I picked it up and brought it home proudly to my mother who, I thought, would pat me on the head and tell me what a good boy I was.

No such thing!

She screeched an unearthly screech, snatched the needle from me and threw it out into the street again. I am convinced, looking back on it, that she expected me to die shortly — but, of course, I didn't.

You can imagine how far you will get if you try to reform these good- and bad-luck idiots. Tell an actor that it doesn't matter if he tosses his hat on the bed. Tell him he doesn't have to say "break a leg" when a fellow-actor goes out on the stage. Tell him it's all right to say "Macbeth" instead of the "Scottish play" — and you will get nowhere.

Then there are people who, having said something smug, will look about desperately for a piece of wood. They hit it with their knuckles and say, "Knock wood." (These days when so little wood exists, they must go crazy.)

If you say to them, "Why do you knock wood?" they will answer, "It's bad luck if you don't" — if they bother to answer at all.

There are people who will not pass under a ladder that is leaning against a wall, or who have a virtual fainting fit if a black cat runs across their path.

"Why does that bother you?" you might ask.

"Bad luck," they gasp.

To have so many ways of developing bad luck simply makes one terribly unhappy. Tell them gently that there are no such things as good-luck objects and bad-luck objects and you are quite likely to get a punch in the nose.

People don't want their follies withdrawn from them.

There are also curses on objects, usually on valuable ones. Or at least, so people believe. We have all heard of famous diamonds that carry a curse. We read stories of families who labor under a curse from generation to generation. It's hard to believe that anyone can accept such nonsense — but they can.

Just in order to end this essay on a light note, though, I will tell you my favorite curse story.

A man in an airplane couldn't help but notice that a very beautiful woman sitting next to him was wearing a monstrous diamond.

He stared at it as unobtrusively

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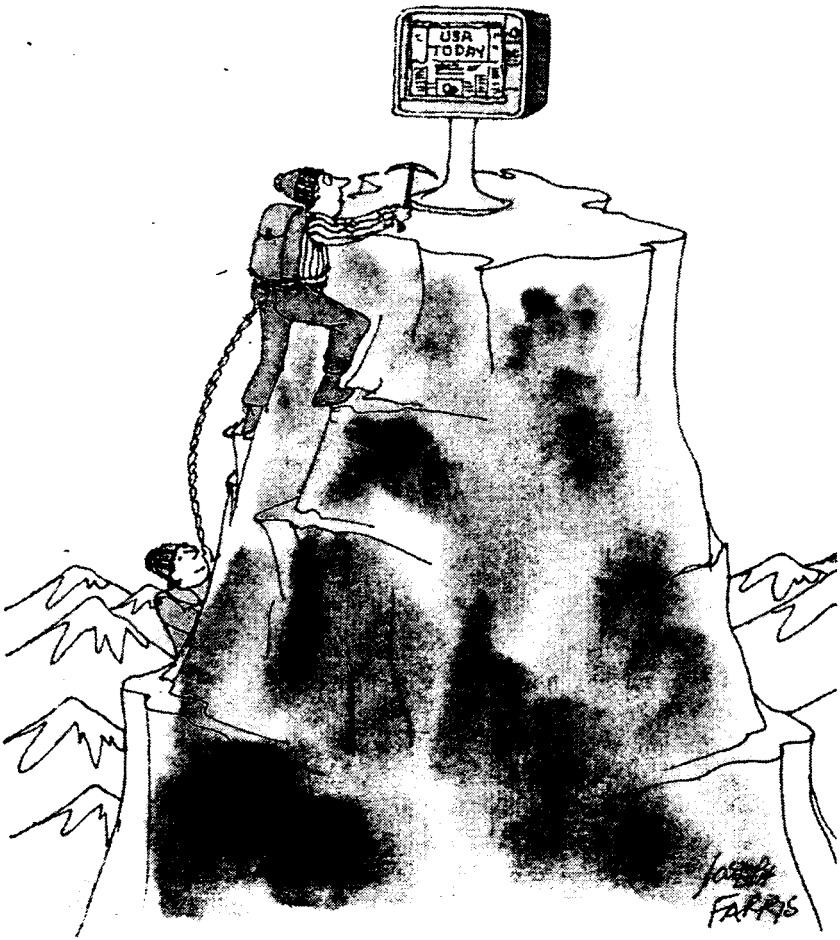
as he might, but finally, his curiosity overcame him.

"Pardon me," he said, "but is that a real diamond?"

"Real as anything," said the woman. "It's the famous Kripnitz Diamond. It comes with a curse."

"It does!" said the man, more interested than ever. "What is the curse?"

"Mr. Kripnitz."



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Alternate histories have become a popular form these days, and no one does it better than Steven Utley. In "Look Away," he takes a traditional alternate history subject — the victory of the South in the Civil War — and adds a unique spin.

Look Away

By Steven Utley

AT SUNSET THE bluffs below Memphis burned. Tangled, leafless trees along the Arkansas bank seemed to writhe against a backdrop of flame-reddened sky. Until then the war had been far away and as long ago as last year's bad dreams, but suddenly I was put irresistibly in mind of burning towns and ruined countrysides.

At my side, Colonel Soileau puffed on his cigar and looked content. "It's mighty good," he said, "to be on this old river again. None of those tricklets back East quite compares."

"They say that the Amazon puts even the Mississippi to shame."

"Then it truly must be something to take a look at. We'll just have to go see for ourselves, won't we?"

I made no reply, and after a moment my subdued mood must have registered on him, for he said, "Having second thoughts?"

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"Some small, scattered ones, sir, I have to confess. There was a strightforwardness in being a cavalryman that is missing from this enterprise. And I find that I'm more afraid of failure now than I have ever been before."

The colonel removed the cigar from his mouth and turned his head to look at me. His face was weirdly highlighted in the commingled light of setting sun and lanterns. With his glittering eyes and his bushy white eyebrows that met above the bridge of a great hooked beak of a nose, he had the look of a night-hunting bird. I had known battle-weary soldiers to express a preference for having minié balls whiz about their persons rather than be transfixed with the old man's awful glare.

Yet his manner with me was kindly. "Heaven knows," he murmured, "that perils attend our enterprise." He spoke so softly that I barely heard him above the sound of the paddle wheel. He made a gesture that took in Mississippi to the east, Arkansas to the west, and everything beyond each. "This could be the breaking and not the making of us all. So, entertain as many doubts as you like until our rendezvous with the cruiser. I hope that I may still be able to rely upon you then."

"Colonel —"

"I *have* always been able to rely upon you. Shall we go into the saloon now? The sight and sound of all this water have made me powerfully thirsty."

"Of course, sir."

In the saloon I saw Mayhew, the cotton merchant. We had met him first thing upon boarding at Memphis, and I had quickly found him to be an obsequious bore. Now he was sitting at a table with two other men. He indicated with a wave that we were welcome to join his party, and I could only repress a groan as Colonel Soileau headed straight for him. There were not many other people in the saloon, and none that we knew, and we were therefore trapped by etiquette. In one corner a handful of musicians plucked at and tootled over "Dixie."

Mayhew and his companions stood to receive us. The older of these, whose empty right sleeve was pinned neatly to the breast of his frock coat, was introduced to us as Major Pennell, "late of the Army of Northern Virginia." The younger man was Bradley Mayhew. It took me a moment to see any resemblance between the cotton merchant and his son: Mayhew *père* was blocky and coarse-faced; Mayhew *fils* was fine-featured and fair-

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probably about nineteen years old. His handshake was clammy, and he could barely meet the colonel's fierce eye, but he gave me what I interpreted as some kind of hopeful look. I was closest to him in age, having only part of a decade on him. I was introduced simply as "Gravois, Colonel Soileau's secretary." As the five of us sat down, a steward brought extra glasses and more whiskey.

"Would you be the Colonel Soileau," Major Pennell said, "who served on Albert Johnston's staff during the campaigns in Tennessee and Ohio?"

"I am the one, sir. I was with Beauregard at Charleston, too."

"The colonel was there when the shooting started," I put in, just like a good little toady, "and there when it stopped." This appeared to go well with the Mayhews, but Major Pennell merely gave a soft grunt to acknowledge that he had heard me. He was sharper than he looked, I decided, and I had better be careful of him.

To Colonel Soileau, he said, "Even in Virginia we heard how one of Johnston's staff officers, a man somewhat advanced in years, rallied a regiment at Shiloh, after all of its officers had been killed or wounded, and hit the Yankee line like Hell itself." Major Pennell grinned around his cigar at young Mayhew. "That's how the journalists described it, Mr. Mayhew: 'Like Hell itself.'"

The youth regarded Colonel Soileau very intently and said, stammeringly, "Then I salute you, sir, and — I envy you!"

An instant after he had delivered himself of that, he crimsoned to the roots of his macassared hair. His father struggled to conceal his own embarrassment. Suddenly I understood: young Mayhew had sat out the war in his father's trading office somewhere, and hated himself for it, and perhaps hated his father as well for letting him do it. It is a soldier's inalienable right to despise all civilians as slackers, and yet I found that my contempt for the young man was outweighed by an unexpected and morbid curiosity about him. Perhaps his father had even encouraged him to do it, and now sought to make some kind of amends by forcing the company of soldiers and ex-soldiers on him. Or, alternatively, perhaps the father had not been so encouraging, and intended the company of soldiers as torture.

As I entertained these and other unpleasant speculations, Major Pennell touched his empty sleeve and said to the colonel, "Young Mayhew does not envy me entirely, of course. In my case, the Yankees happened to

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hit back like Hell itself."

His voiced lacked any trace of bitterness, and yet his words must have smashed to bits whatever self-esteem Bradley Mayhew still possessed. They even had a sobering effect on the senior Mayhew for several seconds. Then that lumpish individual brightened and began to burble. "Nevertheless," he said, diplomatically swiveling his gaze back and forth between the two officers, "you two saw history being made. You helped to make it, in fact." He remembered me, finally. "Oh, and you must have been one of our brave heroes in gray, too, Mr. Gravois."

"I was a calvary courier, Mr. Mayhew, and I wore butternut. I saw a great deal of hard riding, but hardly any fighting." I could have added that I had seen the Ohio Valley scorched virtually from end to end.

Colonel Soileau gently chided me. "Do not be so dismissive of yourself, Gravois. You performed an invaluable service. You will be able to say to your children and grandchildren, 'I carried dispatches.'"

"Yes," Major Pennell added, "it has more of a swing to it than, 'I lost an arm to a Yankee bullet.'"

The remark was in very poor taste, and for a moment, Colonel Soileau seemed about to employ his formidable frown. He thought better of it, however, and made a gallant essay with, "Major, I fear our time may soon be past. Ours is a young nation, and it is young men like Gravois here, and young Mayhew" — Bradley Mayhew flinched as the colonel's owl gaze settled upon him for a second — "who will be making its history from now on."

Old Mayhew said, "Gentlemen, let us now raise our glasses in a toast."

We raised our glasses.

"To the Confederate States of America," the cotton merchant intoned. "Long may they prosper!"

We solemnly echoed the sentiment and drained our glasses. I noticed that, young as he was, Bradley Mayhew knew how to inhale whiskey. His father immediately refilled everyone's glass, then gave Major Pennell an expectant look.

The major rose to the occasion. "To all who fought for the South, couriers as well as colonels. May God bless every man who defied oppression and helped to secure the defeat of the tyrant Lincoln!"

"Hear, hear!" And we drained our glasses a second time.

It was my turn next. I got by with a paraphrase of a toast I had once

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heard Albert Sidney Johnston raise to the ladies of the Confederacy.

Major Pennell smacked his lips softly and looked at me. "The colonel is right. Now that the fighting and marching are all over, we're all supposed to go home and get on with our lives. I imagine that things are going to seem awfully dull for some of us from now on. But what do the Confederacy's young men propose to do with themselves?"

I gave him a tight-feeling smile. "Some are headed to New Orleans, thence to Galveston, to seek their fortunes in Texas."

"Well, Texas could be exciting, I imagine," said old Mayhew, too heartily.

"I understand there are still Indians to fight in Texas," said young Mayhew, too earnestly. I was past even morbid curiosity by this time; the Mayhews had begun to make my skin crawl.

"The army," Major Pennell said, too dryly, "has pushed the Indians rather farther west than Galveston."

"The army has no business fighting Indians in Texas!" The colonel spoke the word *Indians* as though it tasted bad. "Let those so-called Rangers fight Indians. Soldiers need a real enemy."

The Mayhews looked taken aback by this outburst. The major nodded and said — again, too dryly — "Yes, we *have* got to keep our pride."

For my part, I could already feel the warmth from the whiskey, and I was watching the colonel closely. Anyone who did not know him probably would have thought that he was taking his liquor very well, but I knew him and knew that a little whiskey went a long way with him. If his outburst were not enough, I could have told by the reddening of his eye and the thickening of his speech that he had already veered toward the rim of the abyss.

Then, to my further dismay, old Mayhew, having made certain that the glasses were full again, turned to the colonel and said, "I believe it is now your turn to propose the toast."

Without a moment's hesitation, Colonel Soileau raised his glass and said, "To Mexico, Cuba, and Brazil," and if I had not been stunned by his recklessness, I would have wished that lightning had blasted him on the spot before he uttered the second syllable. As if by afterthought, and as though he had not said enough already, he added, "And to wars to come!"

The Mayhews gave each other astonished looks. Major Pennell started, but recovered instantly and, with his glass still raised, said, as mildly as

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though he were giving someone the time of day, "The Confederacy has already fought the only war it needs to fight, sir. Fought and won it."

The colonel puckered his hairy brow and replied, "Major, it is our manifest destiny. Just as the United States must push westward, we must push southward."

"But to speak of foreign adventures now, when our nation is still practically impoverished —" Major Pennell half-turned to old Mayhew. "Is your business now nearly as good as it was in 1860?"

"Well," the cotton merchant began, but Colonel Soileau cut him short with a growl.

"All the more reason," he said, "to move quickly — before the army is completely dismantled. The Southern fighting man is one of our great assets. He is the equal of any soldier in the world, even of the French — I say that as a proud descendant of the warrior race of Europe. Moreover, no navy in the world is a match for our ironclads. And the *Alabama* is the finest cruiser afloat!"

"Certainly Southern fighting men performed prodigies on the battlefield, Colonel, but they had the best reasons men ever have. I will go so far as to say that they had the only just reasons — they were defending their homes and fighting for their liberty. But Mexico and Cuba are different propositions. I doubt if one butternut in ten even knows where Brazil is, let alone how he might get there or what business he might have there."

The two officers had gradually lowered their glasses to the table during this exchange, and the rest of us had quietly followed suit. The toast was forgotten. Color was creeping into the colonel's normally sallow cheek, and a scowl had taken up permanent residence on the major's face. Some men of my acquaintance probably would have left off arguing at about this point and challenged, and others would have brandished their canes, but the colonel's age and the major's empty sleeve ruled out such options. The officers were locked in this argument till death, or least through an evening, unless someone intervened. I pressed my foot hard against the colonel's under the table, but he would not look my way. I tried by effort of will alone to get him to shut up. I might as well have tried to will a cyclone into submission.

"Just put a good man like Johnston or your Robert Lee or Tom Jackson at the head of a Confederate Army," the colonel was saying, rapping the tabletop for emphasis, "and you will see how easily Southern fighting men

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can find their way anywhere in the Western Hemisphere."

"That sounds familiar," the major responded, in a tone of voice that stopped just short of sarcasm. "I recall a time, not long ago, when my comrades and I had every expectation of marching straight from Richmond to Washington within a week's time. We thought that Yankees wouldn't give us much of a fight. We learned differently at Manassas and Sharpsburg."

"I'll see your Manassas and Sharpsburg, Major, and raise you Shiloh and Cincinnati. And I'll tell you this, sir — there isn't another army in the Americas that could give us the sort of fight we had at Shiloh. That was a stand-up fight between white men. I was with Scott in Mexico in the forties. We defeated one armed mob of overdressed greasers after another. We lost fewer men in the whole campaign than were killed on picket duty on a typical day in Ohio. The only thing standing between us and the Strait of Magellan now is a lot of greaser and niggers." He shot a quick look at Bradley Mayhew. "And *Indians*."

While young Mayhew had tried to make himself unobtrusive, and I fumed helplessly, old Mayhew had watched in obvious horror as the argument ran away with his table guests. His expression was that of a man whose expectations had been most cruelly thwarted. Now, however, at last he had seen what evidently appeared to him as an opportunity to deflect the officers' mounting antipathy from each other and toward a third party. Sweaty, red-faced, he put on what was intended as a smile but looked like a grimace, and said, "This fellow Juárez who's *president* of Mexico now, I believe he is an Indian. How can Texas stand to have such a country for a neighbor?"

Major Pennell looked at him as though he had just descended from the moon, but the cotton merchant's remark had the effect of pouring kerosene on Colonel Soileau's fire. The colonel slammed his fist down on the tabletop with enough force to cause amber liquid to slop over the rims of the forgotten glasses, and he said "*Exactly!*" with such extraordinary vehemence that conversation momentarily ceased throughout the saloon. I saw faces turn toward us. Even the musicians faltered at their slaughter of "Marching Through Maryland."

I made a show of consulting my watch and said, "Colonel, we really must hurry if we are to have our supper."

"Hang supper, Gravois." Though he spoke to me, he did not take his

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eyes off Major Pennell, who met his gaze levelly. "Major, any single well-publicized incident — an exchange of gunfire along the Rio Grande, let us say — would suffice. Texans don't like greasers as a matter of course, and the other Confederate states would back Texas, just as all backed South Carolina after Fort Sumter. There is another *best, just* reason for soldiers of the South to fight — to establish and maintain the white race's primacy. And think of what else we would gain. Not just territory and treasure, but a true bonding of our people, a cementing together of the Confederacy!"

The major managed to shake his head without breaking eye contact. "Perhaps the states don't *want* to be permanently cemented together. I understand that, at the height of the war, Georgia considered seceding from the secession."

"That was a seditious rumor, spread by Yankee spies! The Confederacy can survive only if the states stand by one another."

"The baboon Lincoln said essentially as much in defense of the Union," Major Pennell drawled, "and we disputed at length with him."

Colonel Soileau opened his mouth to deliver some retort of his own, but I placed my hand upon his arm and interjected, "Sir, we really *must* be going now." I had had quite enough.

His cheeks were already aglow; now his whole face began to mottle. He turned toward me and regarded my offending grasp as though deciding which of my fingers to bite off. Ordinarily, I would have quailed before his glare, removed my hand, and apologized. There was too much at stake, however. If I had come somewhat later than he to wholehearted belief in the rightness of what we were about — for God, country, and President Davis — then I was prepared to go as far with him as I must. Better that I should take liberties with him now and risk one evening of his wrath than let him imperil our mission.

He looked from my hand to my face and must have read therein my determination, for he set his mouth against whatever harsh words he had been about to loose, and nodded, first to me, then to each of the others.

"You must forgive me, gentlemen," he said, "especially you, Major Pennell. Ours is a new nation. It is only too easy for one to be carried away by one's own enthusiasm."

Major Pennell accepted that with a gracious little speech of his own, to the effect that enthusiasm, after all, had carried them as far as Cincinnati and the Yankee Capital itself. He ruined it, however, by saying at the end,

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"There is nothing like being fetched up short by a minié ball, Colonel, to dampen a man's enthusiasm."

The colonel gave him a smile as thin as the edge of a razor, nodded once more to the Mayhews, and strode out of the saloon with me close on his heels. He moved stright to the rail and gripped it with such force that I half-expected the wood to crack in his grasp. He said nothing for a time, but stared out across the water towards Arkansas.

Finally he looked along his shoulder at me. "Gravois, that man is the next-worst thing after a traitor."

I said, rather sharply, "Forget him, Colonel. He is a bitter man trying to amuse himself."

"His kind would have us stand pat, have us *sit!* We are bound for *empire,* and he would have us be a quiet, inconsequential little nation of — of planters and plowmen!"

"You shouldn't have let him annoy you, sir. And if we are to succeed, it is not just you who must rely upon me. *I* must rely upon *you.* No more proselytizing to strangers! We are just two peaceful citizens, a retired army officer and his secretary, on a business trip to New Orleans."

"How can we succeed, Gravois, with men like Pennell — and half-men like that Mayhew? Ugh!"

"They aren't typical. At least, let us hope that young Mayhew isn't. Perhaps he'll even be grateful for a second chance to do his duty. And even a man as cynical as Major Pennell may come around, once men like *you* have set things in motion."

We would be in Cuba before the month was out, and so, too, the *Alabama,* paying a friendly visit. By this time next month, if all went reasonably according to plan, the cruiser would be at the bottom of Havana Harbor, the Confederacy would resound with cries of "Remember the *Alabama!*" and we would have our war with Spain. And by this time next year, who could say? Who can see the end of anything? Mexico, perhaps, or Haiti. There were Caribbean islands that were ours for the taking, if we could but get to New Orleans without Colonel Soileau's telling everyone on the Mississippi what we were about.

"Now, come, sir," I said, "and let us get our supper."

He put out his hand for me to take, and murmured, "Yes, of course." I barely heard him above the sound of the paddle wheel as it turned ceaselessly, propelling us down the great river, into deepening darkness.

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Since Wendy Counsil last appeared in these pages she has sold a few stories to literary markets and one to Pulphouse: A Fiction Magazine. *"'How to Tame the Vampire,'" she writes, "is very much influenced by the imperative voice story 'How to Talk to a Hunter' by Pamela Houston (reprinted in the 1991* Best American Short Stories*). In addition, I have frequent urges to write genre metafiction — horror or fantasy that explores the conventions of the genre within the tale itself. I've been musing about the symbolic significance of the vampire for some time. A friend's offhand comment that Nietzsche once said: 'Talent is a vampire' started me thinking about broadening the idea of vampirism. Combine that with a bad case of the flu last Christmas, where I had vivid fever dreams, and* viola! *you get this story."*

How to Tame the Vampire

By Wendy Counsil

PRETEND, FOR a moment, that you're a woman in her thirties, a graduate student living in Denver, and that on a Sunday afternoon you are visiting the house where you used to live.

Your estranged husband has just walked into his bathroom. Listen to his shower water splattering against the tile. When you hear the shower massage switch onto "Pulse," wonder why you came over when he asked. For one thing, you are too busy to waste a Sunday here. You need to finish the final outline for your thesis — "Myth and Meaning: Vampires in the Twentieth Century." For another, it would be better to wholly cut yourself off, no matter that you once loved him, and sometimes can't help wanting to make love with him.

Alone in the bedroom that was once also yours, get up and sneak another look at The Letter, even though you have it nearly memorized.

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It's still in his desk drawer, in a file labeled "Savings," which has nothing to do with bank accounts. It was what his mother called her collection of memorabilia; it is what he calls his.

The Letter is two long pages, front and back. It is printed in a round, childish hand, though its author is thirty-five years old. It is postmarked from a New England city. The paper is limp from your haunting its message; the creases are beginning to fray.

Your research on vampires had revealed their value as metaphors to modern men and women. For instance, one likely symbolic meaning of the vampire is "The Obsession." Fixations like yours with The Letter, obsessions keep coming back; they scratch at your window and demand to be let inside; they pierce your veins and sap your strength.

The Letter, dated last May, is to your husband. It begins: "Well! Your last note to me was a surprise, to say the least!" The exclamation marks are balanced over big, loopy circles. They were drawn by a woman named Gigi, a woman you once considered a friend.

Her surprise was in reading your husband's note (not only his last, but the only note he ever wrote to her), a letter that he sent to try and stanch the flow of her late-night phone calls. A note that told her he had lied to her when he bedded her in April, that his marriage was in trouble, and that you and he needed some peace and privacy to work things out. The note, which he showed you just before he mailed it, asked her not to call or write again.

The phone calls from Gigi had begun coming after she had run into your husband in Boston last spring, in the neighborhood where you and he had your first apartment. They had slept together — and he had told her this would be fine with you. Gigi had believed him. Again, wonder how a grown woman could believe such a line: "My wife won't mind." He also admitted to you that he also told her that he was sterile and that he had no venereal diseases. The three most common deceits, and she believed every one. Your husband maintains that since he used a condom, he has no obligation to admit his other lies. At first, you argued with him to behave honorably, and to tell Gigi all she might need to know. After The Letter arrived, you no longer cared.

The Letter from her continues: "I thought she wouldn't mind. Looks like I was wrong! Oh well! Too bad!"

Those words still pierce you, though you know them by heart. In fact,

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The camera moves in to focus on the sharp teeth sinking into the quarry's flesh.

you use them yourself now, as a kind of sick joke. Drop a raw egg on the kitchenette floor? "Oh well," you say to your empty studio apartment. "Too bad!" Earthquake in Chile kills five thousand? "Oh well," you say to the front page of the newspaper. "Too bad!" Worry at how empty you feel at each new disaster, even though that hollowness has been useful for working on the section of your thesis titled "The Vampire's Victim: Drained of Morality and Will."

Back to The Letter: she next tells him how she knew the marriage would never work anyway, though this isn't an observation she ever made during the first eleven years you and he were married. But here Gigi finds a dozen reasons why you would be impossible to live with. She writes: "She always seemed to be lacking in direction, roots, purpose. Unstable and overly independent — I don't know how you put up with her for so long!!"

Know, deep down, that you were a good wife and partner, in ways that she could never guess. Hope that reading this judgment from your onetime friend wasn't the main reason you decided to go back and finish your master's degree. After you moved out of the tri-level house you had built with your husband, you had too much free time, evenings you once spent talking with him, going to movies and restaurants together, fixing him meals, ironing his shirts, writing his relatives newsy little notes.

Lonely, lacking focus, you went back to college. Now you spend your evenings watching videotapes of old vampire movies. You especially enjoy the scenes where some innocent opens the window to someone she believes to be an old and trusted friend. The shutters bang back in the wind. The vampire steps over the ledge. Then the smile, revealing long white fangs. The victim's scream. The bite, artfully hidden in those movies from the middle of the century; in recent films the camera moves in to focus on the sharp teeth sinking into the quarry's flesh, hot red blood pulsing from the pale neck. That scene is now discussed in Section IV of your thesis: "The Vampire as Traitor."

The Letter turns next to pornography. Three paragraphs of how wonderful Gigi thought your husband was in bed, the best she ever had:

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"For a first time, it was amazing! Yum! What great fantasy material!" You are still appalled at this part of The Letter, that she didn't have the sensitivity to at least wait until you had moved out before coming in for the kill. Imagine that Gigi still uses her memories of your husband to get herself hot. Wish that there were some way you could take that away from her. Know you cannot.

Section V of your thesis, "The Vampire and Lust," deals with the idea that we created vampires as symbols for sexual passion. As a direct descendant from the ancient incubus, the vampire gives us some sort of excuse for — or at least an embodiment of — the darker expressions of human sexuality. Sexual violence, genital mutilation, perversions, sexual betrayals. Your research has you convinced that, while modern horror films play on this theme more explicitly, the idea was there from the first. In fact, you feel that its subtle portrayal by the directors of the thirties and forties is more powerful than the snuff-film approach of today.

The Letter ends with this: "When can we see each other again? I could fly out there, or you could come here and stay for *however* long you'd like." That visit probably never came about. According to your husband, The Letter sickened him as much as it did you, and he has no desire to ever talk with Gigi again. When he first showed you The Letter in a further attempt to save the marriage through belated honesty, he used the word "bitch" to describe her. Since then he has used the words "selfish," "dumb," "lousy in bed," and "a bad mistake." But you moved out anyway, realizing that there was no way you could ever trust him again, no way you could live through one more of her self-involved phone calls or letters. Maybe you should believe his claim that he has learned better. Maybe one day, when you come over and find The Letter is gone, you might. But maybe he *has* seen her again, despite his promise that he will not, has not. In your nightmares, he certainly has.

The one recurring dream is so vivid, it is hard to believe it isn't somehow true. In the dream, you are in bed with your husband at night again, sleeping. A scratching sound at the window wakes you. He sleeps on while you investigate. You draw back the gauze curtain. Outside stands Gigi, her dyed black hair blowing wild. She wears thick eye makeup and dark lipstick, and is naked as an animal. You worry that the neighbors will see her, and so you open the low window. As she steps into the bedroom, she smiles, baring long white vampress fangs. They drip

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with fresh blood. She glances at your husband. You find yourself holding a gun, an ancient single-shot dueling pistol. You raise it and aim at her forehead. Steadily, your finger presses the cool trigger. The bullet slams out of the barrel. It pierces her forehead, then shatters the glass in the window behind her. You can see the hole the lead slug has made in Gigi's skull. She stands there and laughs at you. Outside, the wind picks up and blows in through the window, then over the hollow place in her head, sounding a whistle that rises to a shriek that becomes the noise from your own throat as she comes for you. Her mouth gapes open. Behind the fangs is an endless tunnel of throat, black as the inked pits of Hell. And each time you jerk awake in your single bed in your tiny apartment, the nightmare stays bright in your mind — so vivid that you find it hard to think that it is only a dream.

The nightmare has, at least, helped you to begin the concluding section to your thesis, "Why the Vampire Cannot Ever Die." In the movies, magical weapons can destroy the eternal soul of the monster, but in ancient legends the vampire could never be beaten. Know there is a reason for this, and trust the reason, believe in the truth of it, though you might still have a hard time finding the right words to describe the reasons for your conviction.

In the next room, the shower turns off. Quickly now, stuff The Letter back in its envelope, and the envelope back in the file, just how you found it. Ease the file drawer shut, then climb back into bed. Force your breathing to become as slow as in sleep. Your husband returns and stands by the bed, blocking much of the late-afternoon light from the window. He looms over you. Feel the pulse pounding hard in your throat. He whispers to you. He says, "I wish you'd come back to me. I'm sorry I hurt you. I miss you."

Don't move or speak. Make yourself think: "Oh well. Too bad."

His lips part as he leans down to kiss your neck.

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Carolyn Ives Gilman's most recent appearance in F&SF was "The Honeycrafters," an off-beat fantasy story set in a ficticious world. "Lost Road" occurs in a more realistic setting, the farmlands of the Midwest. "I've had occasion to do a fair amount of traveling through western Minnesota and South Dakota in the last year," she writes, "and I've been getting a feel for the rural landscape. 'Lost Road' is based on a true incident I learned about during that time."

Lost Road

By Carolyn Ives Gilman

IT WAS dry that year. By June the corn that should have been knee-high was stunted and papery in the fields; the pasture grass rustled, stiff as broom straw, in the constant wind. The topsoil had turned powdery, and you could see it blowing off the fields in clouds, making the sunsets red.

To Betty Lindstrom it seemed like her whole world was drying up, cracking, and blowing away. She and Wayne had had to lease out the last forty acres that spring to a man from the next county who was farming nearly all the land in their township. He'd taken out the fences and cut down the beech-tree windbreaks Betty's father had planted in the thirties, and now plowed fields came right up to the edge of the farmhouse yard on every side.

After supper one evening, Betty took Chipper and walked out to the endless cornfield where her grandfather's original farmstead had been. She

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stood with the wind blowing strands of gray hair in her eyes, trying to trace the outline of the foundations. But they had been scraped away, planted over. Just like Wayne had been scraped away by the stroke, his wit and cheer dried up, powdered, and scoured in the wind.

Betty drove Wayne into the town of Lost Road every week, inching along in their 1978 Volare with Chipper in the backseat, his nose pressed eagerly to the window. She didn't like driving. Wayne had always done the driving before the stroke. Whenever she sat down behind the wheel with him to her right, it made her aware that the man she had married was gone, and a stranger now shared her life. The county road blurred in front of her, a straight line meeting the horizon in a T. Every now and then, another car would come along, and she would veer over onto the shoulder till they were safely by.

As they drove toward the gas station, their car was the only thing moving on the main street of Lost Road. The buildings were weathered, colorless, and spaced too far apart. A block off the main street, the derelict shells of old grain elevators stood along what had once been a Soo Line feeder track. Around them the prairie had begun to reseed itself.

The gas station stood under an old Pure sign no one had ever bothered to take down. Its garage door always stood open on a cluttered, grease-stained interior. Betty had never been inside the garage; that was a man's world. She had been in the office a few times, and remembered faded packs of gum under a glass counter frosted by a half-century of quarters passing over it. No one was around, so they helped themselves from the single pump, filling the car and the two five-gallon cans in the trunk for the generator. Wayne shuffled into the office, his overalls hanging loose on his stick-thin body, his visored cap saying CENEX. Dan Erickson would soon show up to talk to Wayne about the weather and how the topsoil was blowing away. They'd complain about modern farmer-businessmen. Then they'd talk field hands and field goals, forward passes and tillage passes. Wayne would say, in that old-man way he had now, how hard farming used to be and how glad he was to be out of it. And he would fool no one.

Betty pulled out into the main street and drove down to the corner store. Inside, the dusty windows cast a tired light on half-empty racks of drugstore sundries and groceries. Betty picked up some toilet paper, bread, a pair of bananas, and milk from the wheezing old cooler in the back. She did her real shopping once a week at the IGA twenty miles farther down

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the road in Canby.

"How you getting through this dry weather?" Dot Meyers said when Betty brought her purchases to the counter.

"Oh, we're O.K.," Betty said. "Got any mail for me?"

Dot checked the box and brought out a couple of bills and a magazine. No letters.

Dot began packing the groceries in a bag. "Didn't see you at church last Sunday. We get kind of worried about you, you know, out there all alone in that farmhouse."

"We're doing just fine," Betty said. It was none of Dot's business anyhow. Wayne had always teased Betty about being a deadpan Swede who never let any troubles show. She probably was, and too late to change now. Besides, the Wayne who had once made her want to change was gone.

"We had a big meeting about our Lost Road Days festival," Dot said, taking a hand-printed sheet and sticking it in Betty's grocery bag. "We're looking for people to make things for the bake sale."

Dot was always trying to organize things. Now she was secretary of the local historical society. Betty knew exactly what the festival would be like. A dozen or so old-timers sitting around the church lawn while Hank Osterholm gave the usual speech about the history of Lost Road.

"I'll think about it," Betty said.

As she carried her bag out to the car where Chipper waited, Betty looked over Dot's flyer. On the back, it had a typed paragraph about the history of the town.

> *Lost Road was founded in the 1870s, when New York speculator Jeremiah Parker surveyed a road over his landholdings between the Yellow Medicine and Big Sioux rivers. Returning East, he published a map showing the road studded with towns. In a promotional pamphlet, he described the area as a thriving agricultural region. He induced several hundred settlers to buy land and move West. But when they arrived, they found none of the promised road, traffic, or towns. The hardy pioneers among them who survived the first winter called the fiasco "Parker's Lost Road."*

* * *

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BETTY PUT the groceries in the back seat, thinking to herself that pretty soon they could stop calling it Lost Road and start calling it Lost Town. The building fronts around her looked like they might start to crack and flake away any second. All the young people had gone to the city. Pretty soon the town would just collapse of old age and get scraped away by the bulldozers, and then it would be nothing but a story.

As she started the car, Betty had a strange, reckless idea. What if she just turned east instead of west and drove off out of town? What if she just left Wayne at the gas station and didn't come back? For a moment she actually hesitated. But deep down she knew she'd never do it. She didn't really want to get away from Wayne. He was a part of her, like arthritis. No point complaining.

They left town about 4:20, driving west along the county road toward their farm. The sun glared into the windshield from a cloudless sky. Red-winged blackbirds flew up from the unmowed ditches as the car passed. Down the roadside, telephone poles marched in an endless procession. Every few miles they passed the remains of old driveways that used to lead to farmhouses, back in the days when Wayne and Betty first moved out here. Now there were only fields. Every year the land was getting emptier. They said farming was a business now, not a way of life.

"We've got to go back," Wayne said suddenly.

"Why?"

"We didn't get the mail."

"Yes, I did. It's in the bag. Your magazine came."

He didn't turn to get it. Their daughter, Alice, had sent him the subscription, but he never read it.

"Alice hasn't called for months," Wayne said.

"She called just last Saturday," Betty said.

"How come you didn't tell me?"

"I did. You talked to her. You just don't remember."

Alice was off in the city, having a life filled with events. A trip to Hawaii, a job reassignment, her youngest daughter competing in a state tennis tournament. It all seemed very far away. Betty couldn't remember events like that ever happening to her. Her life was more like the paper than the writing; the background you had to have in order to see the ink.

Betty realized she had been driving automatically, not seeing where

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she was going. It seemed like they'd been traveling a long time. "Did I miss the turnoff?" she asked. But Wayne just shrugged. Betty slowed down. She kept expecting to see their house ahead. Though she couldn't place just where they were, she knew they were close.

In all the landscape, the only thing moving was a combine far away on the horizon, big as a factory on wheels. Betty's thoughts strayed back to those settlers who'd followed Jeremiah Parker's map out here, imagining towns and communities and finding only prairie and wind. She didn't think they were heroic pioneers at all. They'd been duped into believing legends. Now all their bitterness and disappointment had been polished down and glossed over. Yet she could almost feel their unmet longing around her, as if their dust were in the air.

At last Betty decided she'd gone too far, and when they came to a dirt township road, she turned around.

After half an hour, the road ahead still looked exactly the same. Betty was puzzled; she had driven far enough to be all the way back in Lost Road by now. She pulled to the shoulder and stopped.

"What's the problem?" Wayne asked.

"Do you know where we are?" Betty said.

"I thought we were going home."

Betty didn't want to say she couldn't find their house. She'd been driving this stretch all her life. "I guess it's a little farther on," she said, and started up again.

For fifteen minutes she drove leaning forward over the wheel, looking for a landmark. Everything looked familiar, too familiar, just like déjà vu. Betty wondered if she had left town by the wrong highway. She couldn't remember. "Watch for a highway sign," she told Wayne.

There were no highway signs. Before long she had convinced herself she was on Highway 35, driving parallel to the county road. No wonder she couldn't find their house. When she came to a township road, she turned south.

"I've got to pee," Wayne said plaintively.

"Why didn't you go at the station?"

"I didn't have to then. We've been driving a long time."

When he had to go, he had to go. Betty pulled over. Wayne got out and shambled over to the grassy ditch. Betty got up to let the dog out, shoes crunching on gravel. Grasshoppers buzzed in the heat.

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When she looked over to see if Wayne was done, he was staring fixedly out across the ditch. "What're *those*?" he said, pointing.

The low hill opposite them was dotted with rows of gray cylinders lying on their sides. They were too big for oil drums, and they looked so purposefully arranged, like industrial counters on a giant game board. Betty squinted. What *were* they? Then she laughed.

"Hay bales," she said. "They don't make them square anymore, you know, Dad. They're all round like that these days."

But as she turned to shoo Chipper back into the car, she felt fear at her own confusion. Why had they looked so strange for a second. They ought to be so familiar.

They drove on. The telephone poles by the road were casting long cross-shadows over the grassy banks, and birds perched on the wires like silent notes of music. "This is the same road," Betty said. "The same road we were on before."

The sun was getting orange and low; Wayne would soon be getting hungry for his supper. Betty speeded up, desperate to get somewhere, anywhere. She was going to stop and ask directions the next place she saw, pride or no pride.

But there were no places. Vainly, she scanned the fields for the telltale groves of oak and elm, each with a clutch of white buildings nestled underneath. That was the landscape she recognized. But it wasn't here now. No warm, buttery light leaking out past gingham curtains, no dogs in the yard wagging a welcome, no noisy kitchens inviting them in. It was all just legends now.

The sun was on the horizon by the time she came to a deserted crossroad and stopped.

Wayne, who had fallen asleep, roused and looked around. "Where are we?" he asked.

"I don't know," Betty said.

"You mean we're lost?"

He took it very calmly. Matter-of-fact, as if this happened all the time. Betty got up to get the groceries. They sat together on the bumper of the car, eating bread and bananas and watching the sunset. Chipper nosed around in the roadside grass, searching for rabbits or ground squirrels. Eventually he came up to beg, and Betty poured him some milk in a bowl they always carried in the trunk. At first he didn't want to eat the bread,

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but it was all Betty had to give him.

The wind had died down, and the only sound was the crickets. "I know where we are," Wayne said suddenly. "This is Brown's Corner."

Of course. Betty wondered why she hadn't seen it. Across the road was the spot where Brown's store had stood, and behind it the pasture where they used to show movies on a sheet strung between two phone poles. She could remember the grass parked full of Model T's, and people from miles around sitting on plaid blankets spread before the screen, their picnic baskets open and children running around trying to catch fireflies. It had been a night just like this, with a wide-open sky above, when she and Wayne had shared an ice cream, and she'd decided he was the one she wanted to spend her life with.

"I chased you for ten years, you know," she said.

"Yeah, I was Mr. Popularity back then. Remember how we used to go dancing? Glen Miller. Now, that was *music*. Remember 'In the Mood?'" He began humming. "Hey, I bet you still can dance."

"Not me," Betty said, smiling. He hadn't acted like this for ages.

He fell silent, and Betty gradually remembered that Brown's Corner was back in Blue Earth County, where they'd grown up, not out here.

Wayne slept on the back seat that night, Betty on the front. Chipper wasn't happy about being tied to the door handle outside, but eventually he settled down. Betty lay awake for a long time, listening to time pass.

She was awakened by the roar of a semi. She sat up in a daze to catch sight of the back of the truck disappearing down the highway. It was broad daylight. She woke Wayne, and they breakfasted on bread and milk. The sight of the semi had put her in good spirits. She was embarrassed to think of her fear and confusion the evening before. Now she knew they would soon find a town and be home before noon.

And in fact, they had been driving for only half an hour, when she saw some blue silos peeking from a grove of elms off across a soybean field. She slowed, looking for the farmhouse driveway, but it never came. Half a mile beyond, she took a dirt road south, hoping the driveway opened into it. But the farmhouse grove drew even, then passed by, inaccessible off across the fields. The next chance she got, she turned right again, with the same result. Now she knew the driveway had to be on the fourth side. But though she kept a sharp lookout, there was no road on the fourth side. The grove and silos disappeared in the distance behind.

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They were back on the same highway again.

Just after noon, grain elevators appeared on the horizon to the south. As they drew closer, Betty could make out the white steeple of a church and the roofs of houses. She kept expecting the road to veer toward the town, but instead, it continued on west, straight as a ruler. Betty looked with fading hope for a crossroad leading south. Somehow she knew there would be none — and even if there were, it would not lead to the town.

She stopped the car and looked out across the fields. It was no more than a mile or two to walk, but Wayne could never make it, and she couldn't leave him alone in the hot car. She willed back the frustrated tears that filled her eyes. She wanted nothing more than to see a Safeway sign or a Rexall drugstore. She wanted to call out across the fields, "Here I am!" But her voice was a thin, old-lady voice now. No one would hear her.

The road rolled by, familiar as ever. Once, they saw a truck ahead and tried to overtake it, but it was going too fast and left them behind. They crossed an interstate, but there was no exit or entrance, and a tall chain-link fence kept them from the roadside. They stopped on the bridge and tried to signal cars to stop, but no one understood.

They drove on.

"Maybe we could signal an airplane," Wayne said as they sat resting by the roadside that afternoon.

Betty poured the last of the milk into Chipper's bowl, and he lapped it up thirstily. Wayne's idea sounded crazy, but she was ready to try anything. She'd heard of campers lost in the desert signaling planes. "You mean lay our clothes out on the ground in an SOS?" she asked.

"You want to take off your clothes?" he said. She looked at him in surprise; there was laughter in his eyes that hadn't been there for a year.

"Not me," she said.

"Then maybe we ought to just flash a mirror at them. You've got a mirror in your purse, don't you? You've got everything in there."

There was no mirror in her purse, so they decided to break the rearview mirror off the car. They stood in the middle of the deserted road, trying to catch the sun in an SOS pattern. But all the planes they saw were jets so high they were just specks in the cloudless sky. "They'll never see," Betty said despondently.

That evening they stopped at a place where a railroad embankment crossed the road. Betty and Wayne strolled arm in arm up to the tracks,

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Chipper at their heels. Field mice skittered across the cindery railroad bed, and the smell of old creosote rose from the sunbaked ties. Betty stood gazing at the tracks curving off into the west. She felt sure these must be the old Northern Pacific tracks that went out to the coast.

"My brother Lars went away to work on this railroad when I was a kid," she said to Wayne. She remembered standing just like this as a girl, gazing at the tracks, the golden road to Seattle and the Orient. Lars had brought her back a black enamel jewelry box with Chinese scenes painted on it in gold. She'd wanted then to follow the tracks off the farm, but never did it. And now the tracks didn't really gleam anymore; in fact, they looked rusty and unused.

"I know what our problem is," she said suddenly. "We're on the lost road. It's got to be. Those old settlers imagined it so hard it just came to be. No wonder it doesn't connect to anything."

They drove aimlessly the next day. They put the extra gas from the trunk into the tank, but even that gradually dwindled away. Betty felt tired and thirsty. She was sure there had to be some way off this imaginary road, if only she could think of it. When they turned on the radio, the Marshall station came through just fine. They were so close.

That evening they kept driving past sunset, even though Betty couldn't see very well. As twilight fell, they spotted a homey light coming from curtained windows in a little grove far across the cornfields. It looked so warm and inviting, Betty felt a surge of desperation. She jerked the wheel to the side, and the car jolted over the shoulder and through the ditch. Its wheels spun a moment, then it lurched into the field.

"Whoa! What are you doing?" Wayne said.

"I'm leaving the road. I'm going to drive right over the field. Maybe that's the answer."

The car bounced over the corn rows, its bumper breaking off brittle stalks. Wayne looked aghast at the damage she was doing to the field. They were almost at the top of a rise when the back wheel sank into a deep trap of powdery soil. Betty put the car in reverse and tried to back out, but the wheel spun deeper. They were stuck.

Betty laid her head down against the wheel. The mad drive through the field had taken the last of her energy. She couldn't cope any longer.

They sat a long time in silence. At last she said dully, "Well, that was pretty dumb."

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"I don't know what there is left to do that's very smart," Wayne said. It was so like something the old Wayne would have said that tears came to her eyes. To hide them, she opened her door and got out. She let the dog out of the backseat, then walked on to the top of the rise, hugging herself tight. When she got to the top, she stood looking out over the broad, rolling landscape growing dark under the fading sky. There were no lights, no houses as far as the eye could see. So that window she'd seen had been another mirage, another disappointment. Well, she was used to that. What else had there ever been for her?

Chipper, sensing her distress, pressed against her leg. She heard the car door slam behind her, and Wayne's footsteps. He stopped a few feet away from her.

"Don't worry, Betty," he said. "It'll be O.K."

She didn't turn. Her throat was aching. He stepped closer and spoke softly, a little joking. "Hey, don't worry; I'm still here. As long as we stick together, we got no problems we can't solve."

It was the old Wayne's voice. The tears she'd been holding back for months suddenly came, rain on parched earth. She turned and hugged him, hugged him tighter than she ever had. "Don't ever leave me again," she said, her face pressed tight against his shoulder. "I've been lonelier than I thought I could be."

"It's O.K.," he said, then just held her and patted her on the back. It took a long time for all the tears she hadn't cried to come out. At last he gave her a hug and took her hand. "It's O.K.," he said again.

"Yeah," she said, wiping her face. "I guess it is now."

They walked back down the hill and sat in the dirt with their backs against the car and their arms around each other. Chipper lay down with his head on Betty's ankle.

"Hey, I know what to do," Wayne said.

"What?"

He got up and switched on the car radio. A sweet old Glenn Miller song was playing. He sat back down beside her.

"I suppose we should have kept on following the road, wherever it went," Betty said.

"Oh, I don't know," said Wayne. "I don't think there was any right or wrong thing to do. You just do your best."

Betty was gazing off toward the west. The horizon looked rumpled, like

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an unmade bed. "Wayne, look," she said.

"What?"

"Clouds. There's rain coming."

"So there is."

They sat there as night fell, watching the rain clouds sweep slowly toward them over the land.

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Deborah Wheeler just sold her first science fiction novel, Jaudium, *to DAW Books. Her short fiction has primarily been fantasy, published in the* Sword and Sorceress *and* Spells of Wonder *anthologies. She has worked as Dean of Pasadena College of Chiropractic, but it is her experiences as a mother of two daughters, and volunteer preschool gym teacher at the local Y that have most influenced this story.*

MADRELITA

By Deborah Wheeler

THE FILMY SUNSCREEN-canopy that stretched from wall to wall across the West City Children's Park rippled in the offshore wind, as if it were alive, straining at its brightly colored geodesic struts. The filtered light turned the sand in the digging pits velvety, and the slides and swings glowed softly with new paint.

Under a dwarf tree, gone dormant from years of ruthless pruning, Clarida Alvarez sat crocheting a child's sweater in buttercup acrylic yarn while keeping watch on two-year-old Kaitlin. She looped the bone hook in and out, forming row after row of intricate, lacy stitches. Sometimes her hands worked so fast they didn't seem to belong to her, the fuzzy yellow yarn wrapped around the coffee-colored fingers, the blue tracery of the *ligata* tattoo on her left wrist. *Null-ligata,* never been pregnant.

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None of Clarida's friends had arrived at the park yet, but on the other side of the rocket towers, past the chattering first-class citizen mothers and children, sat two other *madrelitas* with their infant charges. Clarida didn't know where rich Japanese and Korean families lived. If the women were new hires, she might frighten them by smiling. They'd be afraid their *patrōnas* would find out, and disapprove.

Clarida sniffed. *Patrōnas* like Mrs. Houseman didn't come along every day. "I don't mind you meeting your friends in the park," she said when Clarida had timidly asked her. "It's good for Kaitlin to have other children to play with, to learn there are nice people in the world besides our own kind."

"Mama Clari!" Kaitlin scrambled down from the climbing bars and ran over, holding up one hand. There was a pink mark where she'd scraped it against her shoe in one of her acrobatic maneuvers. Clarida pressed her lips to the milky skin, scented with powder and lotion. Her own fingers smelled the same way, as if her hands were an extension of the child's flesh.

"All better now?"

Kaitlin nodded, her yellow curls bouncing.

Clarida wiped away the single tear. "Clari *loves* her little Katie."

"Katie *loves* her Mama Clari!" It was their own private game, this little singsong ritual, theirs since the day Kaitlin could barely repeat the words.

Kaitlin trotted happily back to the climbing bars. The outer gates clanged shut, and Clarida looked toward the gate. Her friend, Maria-Josepha Ocampo, stood with one hand on a double stroller and the other anchoring a diaper bag, waiting for the computer to scan and record her pass.

The entrance to the children's park was an iron cage about six feet square, with locked gates on the north and south sides. The other two walls were eight-foot-high bars, curved slightly inward at their tips. They always made Clarida think of fingers poised around a moth, waiting to smash it.

Maria-Josepha said the hands were praying. She went to Mass every month, whenever she got a half-day off. The morning of her *aborta-ligata*, she saw the Holy Virgin floating on a silver cloud—or that's what she told Clarida.

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Maria-Josepha shoved her stroller across the tightly clipped grass to Clarida's bench, sat down in a billow of cheap violet scent, and set her toddler charge on his feet.

Clarida peeked into the backseat of the stroller, where the baby slept with an orthodontic pacifier in her mouth. "She's sweet."

"You seen the new one Dolores has?" Maria-Josepha said. "Colic, and a real temper."

"So, did you go home last week like you said? How is your family?"

"Oh, that brother of mine, he's been hanging around with the cartel runners. My mother's so upset."

Maria-Josepha's mouth twisted. "If he thinks I'm going to help him when he does that—!"

Clarida pressed her lips together and kept her eyes on her crochet. It would take Maria-Josepha years to buy her brother a second-class citizenship, and meanwhile what was he to do? Live at home and go to Mass every day? Clarida's older brother took care of their blind mother, but he didn't ever go to Mass, and Clarida never asked what he did the rest of the time. Her younger brother had been accidentally killed in a cartel raid three years ago.

Maria-Josepha made a small strangled sound. Clarida looked up and dropped a stitch. "Tears, *querida*! What's the matter?"

"It's — there's nothing you can do. I've prayed and prayed to the Virgin to put charity in my heart. But it's nothing to do with my brother."

"What, then?" Clarida slipped the bone hook through the dropped stitch, and then shoved the bundle of yarn into the diaper bag. "Can you tell me? Are you in trouble?"

"Lupe came home last Saturday. She hasn't been to see Mama in months. She said her *patrōna* don't like her to leave the Enclave." Maria-Josepha's eyes met Clarida's, then darted away. "She was — Mama said she was all beat up. The *patrōna's* brother, he's been after her."

Clarida could see Lupe lowering her eyes, moving away from the brother's intruding hands, too scared to say anything. Her lips moved of their own accord. "She was — beat up."

"He got what he was after," Maria-Josepha said. "The *patrōna*, what does she care? She won't say nothing, not even if her husband wants Lupe for himself. She *got* to stay. If she leaves, how she gonna find another job by herself? I give Mama all I can, but there's food — and medicine —"

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Clarida couldn't breathe. The sunscreen-canopy lifted in the breeze, but no air reached her. When they'd all gone to school together, the girls and their brothers like one big family, she'd played that Lupe was her own little sister. Lupe was still small and dark and quiet. And young, very young for a *madrelita*. Some *patrónas* liked that, but most of them, the Anglas especially, wouldn't have hired her without the *ligata*. They wanted to be sure there were no divided loyalties. Some of them insisted on the *aborta-ligata*, claiming that an interrupted pregnancy and sterilization produced deeper devotion. Lupe worked for a Persian family in the Palisades Enclave who didn't require it. If a girl played around and got pregnant, they could always hire another *madrelita*.

In the back of her mind, Clarida heard a dress tearing, the sickening slap of a man's knuckles against a woman's cheekbone. There was no face to go with those hands, only a featureless mask. The mask dissolved into a crimson smoke, filling her vision, thick and smothering like a poison gas. Her back muscles ached, as if remembering. Remembering something that had never happened to her.

CLARIDA COULD always spot Dolores Gomez a mile off by her carrot-dyed hair. Dolores carried the new baby in a soft pack on her chest, and led her three-year-old boy charge by the hand. The pack had pulled up her pink *madrelita's* uniform, showing her patterned silk hose.

"*Dios*, here she comes again," Clarida said under her breath.

"Why don't you like Dolores? You jealous or something? I tell you, it's great to have her on your side. She got me this job, didn't she?"

Maria-Josepha took the baby on her lap and fed her from a bottle while she told Dolores about Lupe. Dolores paced back and forth with the new baby on her shoulder. It cried fitfully, its eyes squeezed shut.

"First thing we gotta do is find out if the brother's still there," Dolores said. Clarida wasn't sure if she was talking to her or Maria-Josepha, not that it made any difference. "My cousin, her boyfriend's sister knows a guy does gardening in the Palisades Enclave. I get him to find out."

"What then?" asked Clarida. "What difference does it make to Lupe?"

"He's gone; she don't have to worry," Dolores said in the same tone she used with her toddler. "She toughs it out; it's over. He still there, and he don't leave her alone once he's got what he wants, then we got to get her out of there."

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"How?" Maria-Josepha asked in a breathy voice.

Dolores smiled as she swaddled the whimpering baby in a comforter and put it down on the bench. "We find her another job."

"Where? One spot opens, there are a hundred girls out there." Clarida jabbed her chin out toward the street. "All of them just as hungry as Lupe."

"You gotta know before the spot opens," Dolores said. "You get in with the *patróna* before she sees anyone else. Easy."

"How can you do that?"

"Oh, come on, Clari," said Maria-Josepha. "This is *Dolores*. She knows *everything* that goes on, West City." There was a drugged serenity in her eyes, like when she told Clarida about seeing the Holy Virgin.

"I take good care of my girls," said Dolores. "When my cousin comes to town next week, you see how I do for her."

Maria-Josepha's little boy came wailing across the grass, one knee scraped raw. "Look after the baby for me, Dolores," she said, and took him to the rest room to wash. Clarida watched Dolores put the sleeping baby in the stroller. *You're jealous because Maria-Josepha likes her,* she told herself. What had she prayed for — charity in her heart?

Maybe I should go back to Mass. If Maria-Josepha can, why not me? I could go to confession and say I'm sorry for the ligata. *Only, I wouldn't be.*

Clarida tried hard to see the cage hands cupping tenderly around her, blessing her. Beyond them the sky shimmered like a poison-white mirage. Kaitlin kicked until the gate computer spat out Clarida's identity pass. It would relay the times of her entrance and exit to her *patróna's* terminal.

Two gardeners in khaki uniforms, with CITYCORPS in three-inch-high letters across the back, swept grass cuttings from the tricycle path into recycle bags. One looked up at Clarida, with her pink *madrelita's* uniform and black hair cut in an uneven slash across her forehead. She stared back. He was even darker than she was, from one of the old inner-city Afr/Am families. That explained the CITYCORPS contract, passed down like an inheritance, which gave him a precious second-class citizenship.

Clarida unfolded the stroller bonnet, shading Kaitlin's body except for her shoes. She tightened her grip on the diaper bag and trotted across the boulevard. At the entrance to the pedestrian tunnel that ran through the massive mall-plex, she handed the guard her identity pass. The tunnels,

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like the boulevards, were technically public property, open even to noncitizens, but this close to the Enclaves, it wasn't unusual to be stopped.

"Ice cream!" giggled Kaitlin.

"No, *vida mia*, no ice cream today."

Clarida pushed the stroller down the two miles of condo-mall and connecting boulevards. The broad tunnels were paved in smooth, multicolored tile, lined with mosaics and frescoes by the CITYCORPS artists. They depicted idyllic country scenes — tropical beaches, fjords, redwood groves. The hollow interior of the complex was a vast open space, five stories tall. Here she passed other pedestrians — an elderly Chinese man, an Angla couple in expensive *promenada* tights, a gaggle of *chicana* teenagers with platinum glitter in their hair.

Just before the high wall of the Sunset Enclave, with its crown of electrified wire, several boulevards converged as motor traffic entered and left through the Members' Gate. At the pedestrian checkpoint, Clarida inserted her card into the slot. The computer scanned her palm print and transmitted her time-in to the Housemans' terminal. Beyond the gate, in the immaculately landscaped plaza, several electric jitneys sat at the white lathe and trailing rose-vine gazebo.

"Let's not ride today," she said to Kaitlin. "Let's walk."

She pushed the stroller along the canopied sidewalks. The native-grass lawns and rock gardens, watered by underground drip systems, exhaled sullenly in the noon heat. At the corner of the Housemans' street was a gravel-paved sculpture garden. Camel, deer, bear, elephant, all in blast-carved lava stone.

Clarida named each of them for Kaitlin, and then sang a little song in Spanish:

This little ele-phant
Gives a kiss to Kaitlin
In her pink dress, her pink dress.
This little ele-phant
Gives a kiss to Kaitlin
In white shoes, her white shoes.

Kaitlin clapped her hands in time to the song.

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The Housemans' yard was all ivy and espaliered jacaranda, alternating between the blue- and-white blossomed varieties. The servants' entrance was on the side of the eight-foot-high wall, rather than in the back. In the white-tiled entry, the household equivalent of the cage, Clarida clocked in with the computer and put the stroller in its storage slot.

The housekeeper unlocked the inner door. An Angla first-class citizen, she treated the rest of the staff with the same warmth and consideration she extended to the furniture.

Clarida set the autocooker to prepare Kaitlin's lunch, then took her to wash up and retrieve her favorite doll from the playroom. On the way back, she noticed the garden room door was partly open. She paused in the hallway when she heard Mrs. Houseman's voice.

"—outrageous to get these girls pregnant just to develop their maternal instincts—"

There was a pause, perhaps an answer on the phone.

"—barbaric and unnecessary. They get their ligations voluntarily, like any other job requirement. Take our own Clarida—|"

"Mama Clari?" whispered Kaitlin.

Lips pressed together, Clarida pulled her away from the door and back toward the kitchen.

Kaitlin snuggled against Clarida's side, one small hand tucked through her arm. They sat in the dandelion-colored rocking chair in Kaitlin's bedroom. Yellow roses bloomed on the quilt, and a hand-painted frieze of the same flowers trailed along the top of the walls. Even the casing of the security scanner was yellow, to harmonize with the room.

A small bowl, porcelain so fine it was almost translucent, held a mass of white carnations wreathed in fairy ferns. The breeze wafting through the open filter-glass windows spread the spicy scent through the room. Some days it would be roses or gardenias. Once, on Kaitlin's second birthday there were sprigs of palmyra blossoms flown in from Hawaii. As soon as the petals darkened, they were replaced. The housekeeper saw to them.

Clarida let her voice settle into a melodic singsong as she recited Kaitlin's favorite naptime story. The child's body drooped, and her breathing slowed in rhythm with the words.

Footsteps sounded along the carpeted hall. The door seemed so thin,

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Clarida could feel the eddies and currents of the air outside. The yellow-and-white room quivered like a flower in the shadow of a steamroller.

Clarida sat frozen, waiting for the door latch to click open. She tried to calm herself. *Why am I so frightened?* Her thoughts fell apart as the shivers began deep within her body.

When her heartbeat returned to normal, Clarida slid her hands under Kaitlin and carried her to the bed. The quilt was so soft, like chick down. She bent over, her arms still around the sleeping girl, studying the outlines of her face. She remembered holding her for the first time — so tiny, not a week old. Getting the job after so many interviews and so many disappointments, one applicant among hundreds, was a miracle. She hadn't realized how much of a miracle until she actually held her new charge.

Clarida remembered examining each fingernail, each fold of Kaitlin's perfect ears. Remembered how tender she was, how delicately made. Remembered the first time Kaitlin hugged her back and said, "Katie *loves* her Mama Clari!"

If I lose my job, I lose her.

The door opened with only a faint forewarning click. Mrs. Houseman moved to the bedside, her starched linen suit rustling, put one hand on the bed, and leaned over Kaitlin. The mattress yielded under her touch. She was tall and slim, her sculptured curves the product of an expensive fitness salon.

"When she wakes up, dress her in something nice. That birthday party is today, not next week. You can have this afternoon for your half-day off, instead of Sunday." Mrs. Houseman straightened up, and the quilt stayed wrinkled where her hand had pressed into it.

After she'd left, Clarida went into her own room and took out the dress she was making for Kaitlin. She sat in the single straight-backed chair, sewing the imported lace trim with tiny, almost invisible stitches.

THE PUBLIC tram whisked eastward along its electric rails, picking up second-class-citizen workers, even a few working firsts, who sat in the front, next to the single air conditioner. Once past the walled West City Enclaves, the tram stopped frequently, passengers getting on and off after short distances. Clarida sat far to the back. She wore her own clothes — a long, dark skirt and full-sleeved blouse, her wide-brimmed hat on her lap. One hand,

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hidden by the folds of her skirt, cradled her Filipino *balisong.* One flip of the wrist would open the double-sharpened blade to slash across an attacker's eyes. Out here, past the barricades, she felt naked without it.

Clarida gazed out at the progressively deteriorating stucco and withered grass, the red-and-black graffiti bleached to the color of watered blood. Occasionally she spotted newer markings in reflective silver. Cartel signs.

Her stop wasn't the end of the line. Streetlights, telephones, and water hydrants still worked some of the time. Coiled barbed wire bounded the boulevards on either side. Here and there a few strands had been cut through, but the only breaches in the brambled mass were the regular stops.

At Clarida's gate, two men lounged against the pipes that supported the barbed wire, and the seedy side of the nearest building, a long-abandoned convenience store. Thick layers of zinc oxide ointment in brilliant colors covered their faces and the backs of their hands. White sunscreen-canopy cloth enveloped their bodies from chin to wrist and boot top. They carried Uzi assault pistols and wore rows of old-style pennies strung on safety pins glittered across their chests. Clarida remembered the dolls her mother had made for her as a child, that she'd made for Kaitlin — a handkerchief tied around a wad of cotton, the ends knotted into hands and feet. She saw nothing fanciful about the way the men moved to block her path.

"Lookit here, somebody's pet nanny come to see how the homeboys making out. Gotta taste for slumming, girl?" Stripes of blue, white, and purple dipped in a chevron pattern to a single purple line down his nose. His eyes looked like bits of whiskey-bottle glass.

She hesitated, not recognizing him. The blue-and-white meant a certain cartel, moving in on the vestiges of the old gangs, but she didn't know their passwords.

"What's the matter, girl? You too good for us or something?" asked the second man, blue-and-white with orange.

They probably wouldn't hurt her, just paw her a bit, maybe extract a few sloppy kisses. She could pay them for trespass on their turf, but it was her home ground, too.

A third man, wearing blue-and-white with dotted white, had joined the group.

"Felipe!" She whirled to face the newcomer. "Felipe, your sister, Maria-

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Josepha, would spit on you if she saw you here like this. And her working two babies to help you out! Only today I saw her, and she says to me how worried she is about her brother, her brother she loves like her own life, her brother she would do anything for—"

He grinned sheepishly and raised his hands in surrender. "Ay, Clari, ease up!"

"Don't be so hard, *madrelita*," said purple stripe. "We didn't know you was family."

Clarida raked the others with her eyes and sniffed. "I am going to visit the house of my mother, who is blind, and my own brother, who has sense enough not to run with scum like you, and perhaps I will also visit your mother, Felipe, so she will not feel abandoned by decent people."

Purple stripe, his face expressionless under the paint, unhooked a safety pin and pinned it to Clarida's blouse. "Wear this whenever you come home. It's no good past Crenshaw, but no one will hassle you here."

"I'll go with her," said Felipe.

Along the street, Bermuda grass and chickweed had burgeoned through the sidewalk crevices, covering the pavement with a dense weaving of runners. Winter rains would turn them into a mat of green, but now the heat had left only stalks that crunched under their feet, sending up puffs of dust. An electric scooter whirred past them, zigzagging between the wreckage. Felipe laughed and made a joke, but she wouldn't answer him.

They passed a few bareheaded youngsters running free, and older children with hats and scabby growths on their faces. A few men, some with full-blown skin cancers, sat in the shade of the awnings, drinking cheap beer. They stank of urine and marijuana.

Clarida paused in front of the abandoned one-story elementary school, its windows long since shattered. She'd gone to class here with Maria-Josepha, Lupe, Felipe, and her own two brothers. In the third stall of the girls' room, on the inside of the door, far left side right up against the door hinges, she'd etched her initials into the layers of green paint. Now the wire fence around the playground had more holes than not, and the yard itself was littered with rust-eaten gasoline automobiles.

If she closed her eyes, she could almost imagine she still belonged here.

"It's been a long time since we played here, all of us together," Felipe said.

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"You shouldn't be running with them," she said. "He was like a brother to you."

Felipe signed. "I miss him, too, but that was years ago, Clari, and we hadn't cleaned out the old gangs. It was bad luck your brother got in the way."

"*We*? You were with them even then?"

"No, of course not. Why do you twist things around like this? You won't believe me about the good things we do, the night *mercado* or keeping the thugs out — and don't say *we're* the thugs!"

Clarida's stomach uncoiled. She remembered hoping she might marry Felipe someday, a double wedding with Maria-Josepha and her brother, the one who was killed. "Please. I don't want to fight."

"You been away too long, girl. You forget what it's like out here."

Clarida couldn't speak to deny it. What was the use? Anything she said would only make it truer. She felt like she did when her mother asked her about Kaitlin.

Felipe looked westward toward the barricades. "Come on, I'll walk you home."

The house seemed exactly as Clarida had last seen it a month ago. The door was open, the living room shadowed. She smelled cilantro and cumin from the kitchen.

"Clari! *Mia sobrina* Clari!" A short, round-cheeked woman bustled in from the front bedroom and threw her arms around Clarida. "How happy it makes my heart to see you! Your mama said you wouldn't come home until Sunday."

"*Tía* Monica! You were just here last month," Clarida said in between kisses.

"Your brother, Concho, when he visits me on his way to La Paz, he asks can I look in on your mama. My only sister, so of course I come."

"Wait, wait a minute." Clarida disentangled herself and pulled her aunt down beside her on the worn sofa. She held her hands between her own, feeling the dry, flinty skin, the tendons like steel. "I don't understand. My brother's gone to La Paz? Is he in some kind of trouble?"

"No, he got a job there — isn't that wonderful? — something at one of those private resorts. A friend of a friend, his cousin married a girl in Oaxaca, and put your brother in for the place. So lucky, you and Concho

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both have jobs now. You work hard for your *patrona*?"

"I don't complain. How's Mama?"

"Sleeping. Don't worry, my sister may be blind, but she's still pretty sharp. I help her for a few days, find some girl, maybe too young to be *madrelita* like you" — with a swift caress to Clarida's cheek — "or her mama don't want her to go so far. She keeps the house, does the cooking, you come home once in a while, your mama, she'll be fine."

Clarida looked around the room, thinking how time never changed this place — the faded print of the Holy Family on the wall, the crack running like a scorpion's tail across the ceiling, the heavy, sagging furniture, the rug with its corners curled up. Outside in the street, buildings changed, mostly for the worse. The people curled up like sacks of rubbish in the puddles of shade, they changed. But inside the cavern of her mother's house, like a chamber deep within an Aztec pyramid, nothing altered. Even the motes of dust had long since settled in their final resting places.

And now her brother, Concho, was gone — she could see his fierce, exultant smile, his head thrown back, the pulse leaping in his throat. In his place, some strange girl would walk through these rooms, sit in these chairs. No, Clarida corrected herself, some kid bringing home a few welcome dollars. No formal employment, no second-class citizenship with its rights and protections, but no *ligata*, either. No Dolores to be grateful to.

Clarida glanced toward the bedroom. *Mama was up all night, crying for losing her last son.* Her eyes stung as she thought what it would be like to have Kaitlin gone from her life. *He's finally free; he shouldn't know how much it hurt Mama.*

"And you?" Clarida said. "The work at the Ensenada clinic goes well?"

"That new director, he charges the *gringo*-firsts twice as much for snake-venom extract, then doubles the size of the free clinic. The melanoma patients, they still come too late. We made a deal with one of the big cartels for pharmaceutical-grade heroin." She made a face, half-disapproval, half-resignation. "At least they don't die hurting."

Clarida lowered her eyes. The darkness of the room became an unbearable physical weight.

"I got some things to do, *tía*. Let Mama sleep, and I'll be back in a little while."

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"You be careful whom you go with, Clari. I know you're a good girl, but there's a lot of resistant TB around these days. You show up a positive Tine, you'll never work as a *madrelita* again. Don't risk it."

Clarida kissed her. "No, of course not, not with Mama depending on me."

The church stood in a little island of flower beds. The sidewalk, although cracked, was swept and cleared of invading weeds, and the outside walls were a patchwork of slightly mismatched paint. The bars on the windows looked new. Clarida noticed the pattern of the flowers — white, blue, white, blue. The cartel protection symbol.

The door swung open easily under a light push. It took Clarida a few moments to adjust to the dimness. The place smelled of sour sweat and wax. Votive candles burned in red and cobalt glass holders in front of a small statue of Mary holding the infant Jesus. A scattering of parishioners knelt or sat on the battered wooden pews. The women's heads were hidden under veils or shawls draped over their shoulders. Their murmured prayers were interspersed with weeping.

Clarida lifted her chin and tossed back her uncovered hair, but no one noticed her. She walked slowly down the side aisle, then something made her stop. She turned and stared at the faces of the praying women. Lupe, all in black, huddled on a pew toward the back. Clarida sat down next to her.

For a long moment, Lupe's only movement was the twitching of her lips. Then she blinked, sending little streamlets of tears down her face, quivering from her chin for an instant before dropping to her wet, clasped hands. Her little silver crucifix gleamed in the dim light.

"*Querida*, it's me, Clari."

At the sound of Clarida's whisper, Lupe flinched. Her eyes flashed white under her swollen lids.

Clarida saw herself, distorted and leering, reflected in Lupe's eyes. Then the image dissolved, and instead she saw Lupe sitting in her room as the footsteps halted outside. She heard Lupe's heart going like mad, and felt the sick fear in the pit of her stomach. The door swung open, and something moved in the shadows beyond. The *patrōna's* brother, like the men in Clarida's nightmare, had no face, only a featureless red mask.

Lupe ducked her head to wipe the back of one hand across her eyes. Her mouth moved, but no words came out.

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"Come on," said Clarida, "let's go outside."

Lupe got up in an eerie silence, not even the rustle of her full skirts or the click of her heels on the bare floor. By the side entrance stood a splintered wood bench in the shade of an overhang. Above it dangled an old bird's nest, long abandoned and scavenged for other, newer nests.

"Maria-Josepha told me what happened," Clarida said. "But she thought it was over. Has he been at you again?"

"He's gone. . . .But it's too late."

"Too late?"

"Clari. . . ."

Clarida put her arm around Lupe's shoulders. Sobbing silently, the girl buried her face against Clarida's shoulder.

"Lupe, it's all right."

"I'm pregnant."

Clarida drew her breath in. "Are you sure, so soon?"

"It's been — I kept hoping he'd stop — three months."

Lupe had gotten her job when the previous *madrelita*, who hadn't had the *ligata* because the Persians didn't require it, got pregnant by her boyfriend. She'd had the *aborta-ligata* at the public clinic, even paid for it herself, but when the *patróna* saw the new tatoo, she was mad about her getting pregnant and fired her anyway.

Clarida clasped the trembling girl tightly in her arms, hardly breathing herself.

"You know," Lupe whispered, "you know the worst thing — is that I'd love this baby. Each time I hold Razeel, I think, I should care for this child as if he were my own. I can be kind, I can be patient, but I can't — *love* —" She wiped away the tears, and no more came.

"If I lose my job, how will I get so lucky again?" Lupe raised her head, her voice steadier. "And without my pay, there is nothing for my brother but the cartel runners, and no heart medicine for Mama—"

"You're not alone. You have Maria-Josepha—"

"I told my sister; she was the only one I told. She says all she can do is *pray* for me. She gives half what she earns to Dolores—did you know that? Mama asks her why, she says be grateful she sends her anything!"

She told me she was saving for Felipe's second-class citizenship. Maria-Josepha had never lied to her when they were children.

"Oh Clari, what am I going to do?"

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Clarida took Lupe's hand in her own and pulled her to her feet. She always expected them to be delicate because Lupe was so small, but they were thick-boned, with wide, spatulate fingertips. Her voice came out angry as a crow's.

"You come with me."

WHEN CLARIDA and Lupe arrived, *Tía* Monica was rattling things in the kitchen, and Clarida's mother was sitting in the exact center of the sofa, as if she'd sprouted there. Lupe stood just inside the door while Clarida sat down and hugged her mother. Under the thin cotton dress, her mother's flesh smelled of cilantro and rosewater lotion.

"Who's that with you, Clari?"

"Lupe Ocampo. You remember her, Mama. We used to play in school."

"*Hola*, Lupe, of course I remember you. Ay, what a long time ago that was. Clari, did Monica tell you the news? Your brother, Concho, he's found work in La Paz."

"Yes, Mama, he was very lucky to get the job."

"It's strange, but when my parents first came north, all they wanted was work, and now my own son returns to Mexico for the same reason. My sister was right to go back when she was young enough to train as a nurse. Ay, what a world we live in. And how is your little *patrōna*?"

Clarida couldn't force the words. Kaitlin belonged to one world, and her mother to another. "I have some money for you. I'll put it in the carved box."

She put the money away and then went into the kitchen. Lupe followed her. *Tía* Monica was stirring a big pot of *chile verde*. Her smile faded as she saw the expression on Clarida's face.

"*Bruja*," Clarida said to *Tía* Monica. Not "aunt" or "nurse," but "witch" or, in the old usage, "spirit-woman." Her mother's sister, who had rocked her as a baby, looked down at her with eyes of obsidian.

"*Bruja*, a thing must be done."

Tía Monica got her bag of medical supplies and held out her hand to Lupe. They started for the back bedroom.

"You want me to come?" asked Clarida.

Lupe shook her head. "This sin shouldn't be on you, too."

"It's no sin," said *Tía* Monica. "It's life for your family."

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After they'd closed the bedroom door, Clarida stood by the window, watching the sky gradually turn swollen and dusky, like the complexion of the fatally ill. The same contagious color infected the low, sagging clouds as they blew in from the west.

Behind Clarida's staring eyes, the shifting red images turned liquid, sweeping away the shadows and the faceless men. Her heart beat fast and strong, like an ancient war drum. She was a woman filled with blood, filled to bursting.

After what seemed a long time, she came back to her body, sitting on the sofa as if she'd always been there. Her head lay on her mother's shoulder, and her mother's arms were tight around her. Her mother sang:

This little ele-phant
Gives a kiss to Clarida
In her pink dress, her pink dress.
This little ele-phant
Gives a kiss to Clarida
In white shoes, her white shoes.

Clarida raised her head and began breathing again. Her pulse was slow and regular.

Lupe looked bleached as she and *Tía* Monica came out. Clarida walked past them and into the bedroom. The medical equipment was gone, but there was a pile of towels stained with bloody discharge and iodine scrub solution. Methodically, she cleared them away and changed the sheets on the bed. She took the small porcelain basin into the kitchen. Looking down at her hands in the bloodstained water, she thought for a moment it was her own blood, or the awful red tide within her, seeping out at last.

Clarida and Lupe went out into the cool blue darkness. The light from the few functioning solar strips was multiplied by battery-lanterns and a sprinkling of candles, charging the moist night air with energy. Out on the main block, the street boiled over with people hawking local produce and Mexican silver, bootleg liquor and clothing and chickens, even a squealing suckling pig somebody had raised in a backyard. At the corner a small band—three guitars and a horn player—blared out an old *mariachi* tune, while some young couples danced and onlookers clapped. The cartel enforcers moved smiling through the crowd, their firearms worn openly.

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They stopped at each booth, collecting their percentage. Children darted here and there, teasing the pig, then running when its owner bellowed threats.

Clarida stopped at a pastry push-stand and bought *churros* for herself and Lupe. She bit into the crisp fried bread, and her mouth filled with the taste of cinnamon and vanilla sugar. From up the block, a woman shouted, "*Niños y niñas*, time for school!"

Clarida and Lupe crowded against one another in the back of the bus, the folds of their skirts overlapping, indistinguishable in the lights that flickered by. An armed CITYCORPS guard stood beside the driver, grimly surveying the compartment. Once past the East City boundaries, the passengers thinned out. Toward the Enclaves, there was no one but the two women, the guard and driver. Clarida and Lupe whispered, their voices echoing in the hollow bus.

"I gotta transfer," Lupe said.

"I'll go with you, in case you need help—"

"No, no, I'll be fine. *Bruja* Monica, she says I'll bleed some, but it don't hurt. I can work. Clari—"

"You come to the park. You let me know you're all right," Clarida said.

Lupe signaled for the next stop, and hugged Clarida quick and hard. "I'll be all right."

The next morning, after Kaitlin's breakfast, Clarida presented herself to Mrs. Houseman in the garden room, where she sat at her antique ormolu desk. Hanging ferns and Swedish ivy interlaced with the polished leaves of rubber plants, saturating the space with green. Clarida stood, not looking at her feet as she usually did during interviews with her *patrōna*, but straight at the woman's mascara-rimed ice-gray eyes.

"I got in late last night."

"Yes, the housekeeper told me the computer reported it. I thought at first there was some mistake, as you're usually so prompt. This is the first serious breach of dependability on your part. I trust you have a good explanation."

"It was a family emergency. I didn't know ahead to plan."

Mrs. Houseman chewed on her lower lip, and her orange lipstick clung to one upper tooth. It seemed to Clarida she was remembering she had abruptly changed her half-day off, so the blame might not be all one-sided.

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Clarida said, "I'm sorry if there was a problem. I'll work my next half-day to make up."

A flicker of relief passed over Mrs. Houseman's eyes. "That's acceptable for now, but if it happens again, I shall be forced to take measures. I know how devoted you are to Kaitlin, but we do have certain standards to uphold."

When Clarida took Kaitlin to the park that day, the gate cage no longer looked like praying hands, only bars that had begun to melt inward under their own weight. Maria-Josepha and Dolores were leaving just as Clarida arrived. Maria-Josepha looked up as she strapped the boy into the double stroller. The baby was already asleep.

"I went home yesterday," Clarida said. "I saw your sister."

"I hope she was in church, praying," said Maria-Josepha.

"So, how is Lupe?" Dolores asked, patting her crying baby in the soft carrier. There was a run in her patterned silk hose.

Clarida stared for a moment at Dolores's green-shadowed eyes, at her rouged cheeks. In the filtered light of the park, she reminded Clarida of a mannequin painted by a color-blind artist. Maria-Josepha looked over-

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stuffed, like a puffy pillow. Even the children moved like animated toys.

"I think," she said slowly to Maria-Josepha, "you ought to talk to your sister about what happened, and not get gossip from me."

"Oh Clari," Maria-Josepha called over her shoulder as she trotted from the play area at Dolores's side. "It's not *gossip* — that's for strangers. You're family."

The next day, Dolores brought her cousin, or perhaps it was her cousin's sister-in-law's niece. Clarida didn't exactly understand the relationship. The girl was young and homely and very anxious to find work. Dolores said not to worry; she'd take care of her. At home, Mrs. Houseman acted as if nothing had happened.

Clarida looked for Lupe in the park all that week, but she never came. Once she thought she saw Lupe's little-boy charge, but the *madrelita* with him kept well away from the others, so Clarida never got a close look.

Maria-Josepha arrived late at the park, and she wore a black ribbon around one upper arm. Her face looked scalded as she sat down on the bench next to Clarida.

Clarida put down her crochet, wondering who had died — Felipe, in a cartel fight?

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"It's Lupe," Maria-Josepha said in a quiet monotone. "She came home in the middle of the night, talked to Felipe, then, after he was asleep, she took his gun — she took his gun —"

Clarida couldn't move. The air turned to ice vapor around her. She drew it into her lungs, where it became thick and red. Again she saw Lupe turn toward the opening door, only now behind it was not some faceless man. There was a sea of frozen blood, and on it floated bodies like bits of plastic, cracked and discolored. Clarida floundered among them, too numbed to swim. She saw the faces of friends and strangers — the Afr/Am gardener at the park, an unknown woman in a pink uniform. Felipe in his blue-and-white face paint. Her dead brother. Lupe and her baby. Kaitlin.

She felt nothing as she sank beneath the waves. The frozen blood had paralyzed her heart.

"Maria-Josepha sniffed loudly. "It's God's will, I know; it's for Him to judge her. I've been praying to the Holy Virgin that God will forgive —forgive her. I don't understand. Felipe said her *patrōna* found out she was pregnant, and fired her."

The sky above the red sea in Clarida's vision was white and empty. A voice she didn't recognize as her own cried, "How — how could the *patrōna* have found out?"

"Someone come looking for her job."

Clarida's muscles suddenly unlocked, and she swiveled on the bench to look Maria-Josepha full in the face. "*Someone* came looking? Who would know she was in trouble?" Who stood on the shore, laughing with the faceless men? "There's only you and me and the *Bruja*. Did you tell anyone else?"

"I might have. I don't remember," whined Maria-Josepha. "I don't know who done it. What does it matter now.? What's the use of asking who told on her? Knowing won't bring Lupe back."

Maria-Josepha wiped her face with a violet-drenched handkerchief. "She's dead. And now you're acting like it was my fault. I'm the one who lost a sister. You should be nice to me."

Maria-Josepha heaved herself to her feet. Clarida stared up at her, unable to answer.

"You won't say nothing, will you, Clari? You've been mad at me ever since Dolores got me this *madrelita* job. You're jealous, that's what."

Clarida sat for a long time, watching the cage fill with Maria-Josepha's

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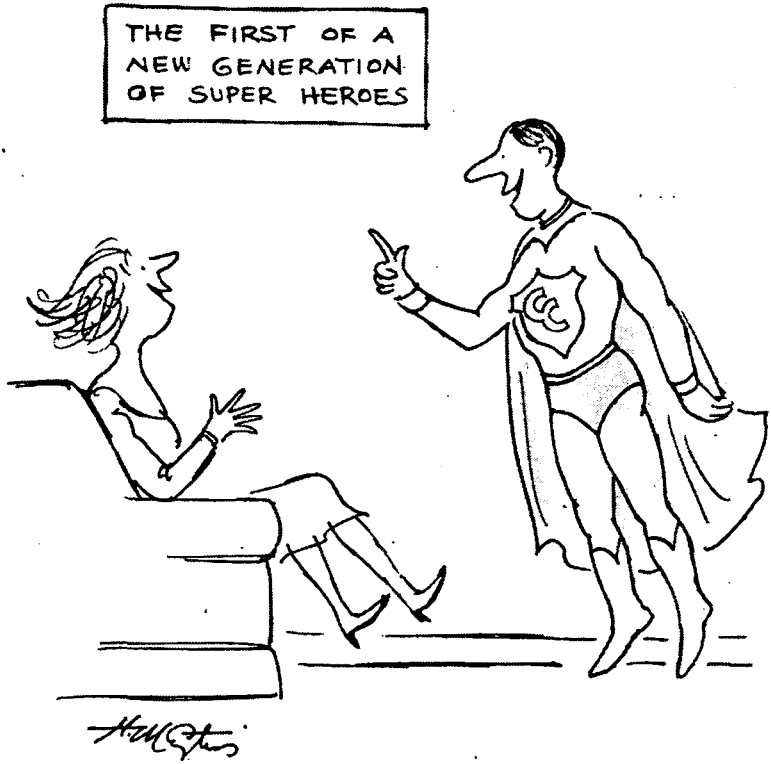
familiar shape, and then empty. She thought of the Virgin on a silver cloud, of hands praying, of the squealing pig. Of the blue-and-white flowers outside the church. Of Dolores's silk hose. Of anything but the bodies on the frozen red sea.

Kaitlin crept into her lap, pressing her body against Clarida's breasts. Small, soft fingers, smelling of powder and lotion and flowers, touched her face.

"Don't be sad, Mama Clari. Don't cry. Katie *loves* her Mama Clari."



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Coming Attractions

FICTION OFTEN focuses on young characters learning and growing through their experiences. Many times the youngsters receive the assistance of someone older and wiser who gives them gifts and sends them off into the world to gain their education. **Grania Davis** offers a twist on this time-worn plot in next month's cover story, "Tree of Life; Book of Death." She mines Jewish folklore for her tale, and brings forth a story about golems, revenge and the dark side of history.

Alternate worlds and another look at history — recent history — also occur in new writer **Marcos Donnelly's** first appearance in F&SF. In "The Resurrection of Alonso Quijana," Don Quixote once again decides to save the world — only this time, he finds himself in the middle of the Gulf War. This literary tour-de-force brings the same intense intelligence that Cervantes brought to the original work, as well as a similar biting satirical wit.

Finally, F&SF favorite **Ray Aldridge** returns with a strong science fiction novella about life and love in the future. There is a resurrection in this story too, although of a very different kind from Don Quixote's. "The Love Farmer" is a story you'll not soon forget.

In future issues, we'll bring you novellas from **Chelsea Quinn Yarbro, Nancy Springer,** and **Jonathan Carroll. Pat Murphy, Rob Chilson,** and **Marc Laidlaw** provide stunning cover stories. And you can also look forward to fiction from **Edward Bryant, John Brunner, Vance Aandahl,** and **Alan Dean Foster.** So keep your subscription current. You wouldn't want to miss stories about nanotechnology, astronauts and folk singers, werewolves, telepathic children, and Frankenstein, now would you?

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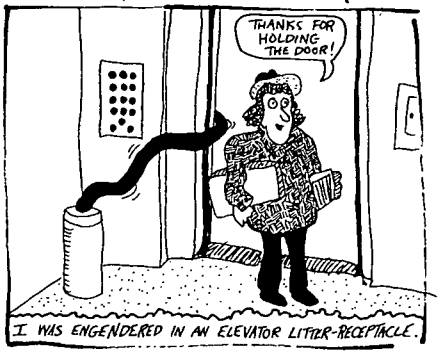
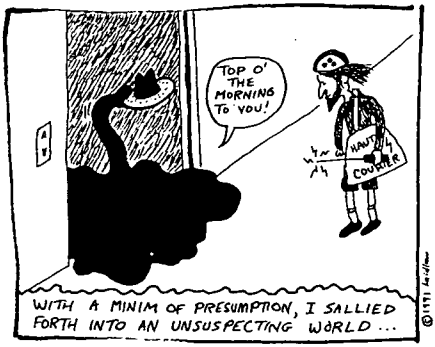
THE THINKING MAN'S "BLOB" (B-MOVIES REMADE FOR DISCERNING VIEWERS) by MARC LAIDLAW



I WAS ENGENDERED IN AN ELEVATOR LITTER-RECEPTACLE.



WITH A MINIM OF PRESUMPTION, I SALLIED FORTH INTO AN UNSUSPECTING WORLD ...

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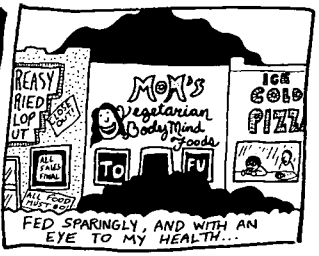
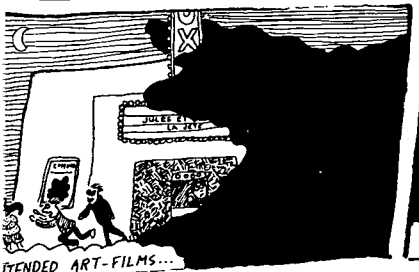
I REACHED OUT TO COMFORT TROUBLED YOUTH...

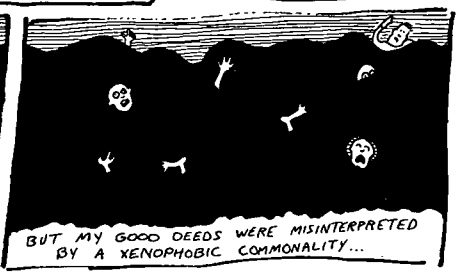
SHELTERED THE HOMELESS...



FED SPARINGLY, AND WITH AN EYE TO MY HEALTH...

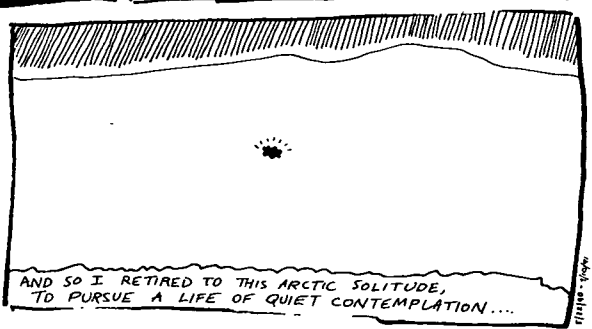


ITENDED ART-FILMS...



BUT MY GOOD DEEDS WERE MISINTERPRETED BY A XENOPHOBIC COMMONALITY...

KNEW I'D FIND NO JUSTICE THERE...



AND SO I RETIRED TO THIS ARCTIC SOLITUDE, TO PURSUE A LIFE OF QUIET CONTEMPLATION....

CURTAINS.

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